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## Non-traditional educational trajectories: the educational aspirations and expectations of women who are educationally disadvantaged

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NON-TRADITIONAL EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES:  
THE EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF WOMEN WHO ARE  
EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED

A dissertation presented

by

Claudia Ditmar Coffield

to

The Department of Sociology and Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of

Sociology

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on the educational aspirations and expectations of a heterogeneous group of women who were enrolled in, or had graduated from, adult education and literacy programs in Boston, Massachusetts. The research questions guiding the inquiry are: 1) Why do educationally disadvantaged women value education—how are these values transmitted, and what are the social processes through which they are translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations? 2) What are the broader social processes and institutional arrangements that shape educationally disadvantaged women's educational aspirations and expectations? and 3) How are gender, age, race/ethnicity, and social class implicated in the development of educationally disadvantaged women's non-traditional educational trajectories?

Feminist standpoint methodologies are used to analyze the educational life histories of each of the women who participated in the study. Using feminist standpoint theories as the overriding theoretical framework for the study, the dissertation argues that social processes of the transmission of educational values and their translation into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations create potential spaces for the practice of resistance to gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class oppression/subordination, presenting opportunities for educationally disadvantaged women to engage in the political process of struggling to achieve a standpoint.

The two primary sources of the transmission of educational values were 1) family socialization processes and 2) work experiences. Within families, mothers and grandmothers transmitted educational values by requiring and enforcing school attendance and by offering active encouragement through explanatory frameworks that conveyed messages about the importance of education to daughters and granddaughters. Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women were encouraged to take advantage of educational opportunities that their mothers and grandmothers had not had because of their

gender or their race/ethnicity, and Latinas and Irish American women were encouraged to take advantage of educational opportunities that mothers and siblings had relinquished by dropping out of school.

The women learned from their work experiences that a U.S. high school diploma or GED was a minimum requirement for obtaining legitimate work opportunities and for gaining access to post-secondary education, which was becoming increasingly necessary to maintain employment. Early schooling provided an important social context for the transmission of educational values. Women whose early schooling was well integrated with family had positive early schooling experiences, and women whose early schooling was poorly integrated with family did not. In the context of their later schooling experiences in adult education and literacy programs, the women translated educational values into educational aspirations and expectations by acquiring self-confidence, by achieving and maintaining various forms of independence, and by accepting family responsibility.

Although women who transitioned to college faced the same barriers to persistence as those who did not, those who transitioned focused not on these barriers but on challenges directly related to their schooling, socially and/or academically, describing strategies they had developed for overcoming these challenges. These women adopted the identity of "serious student," which kept them focused on their educational goals. They worked through academic challenges by producing a sustained academic effort that evolved through the cultivation of their educational aspirations: They learned that they could achieve academically if they tried hard enough for long enough. In addition, they developed effective strategies for negotiating the challenges of transition by drawing on social and professional skills they had developed in their adult education and literacy programs as well as through their tenacity and commitment to their educational, occupational, and professional goals.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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## DEDICATION

To feminist educators, scholars, and activists everywhere  
who continue the struggle for access to all levels of education for all women.  
And to women everywhere who struggle for access to education,  
not as privilege nor as opportunity,  
but as human right.

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## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

This dissertation research focuses on the educational aspirations and expectations of a heterogeneous group of women who were enrolled in, or had recently graduated from, adult education and literacy programs in Boston, Massachusetts. Because most of these women have lacked a U.S. high school diploma in a society where living wage work now requires specialized post-secondary training or at least an associate's degree, they are considered educationally disadvantaged. The purpose of the research is to explain the relationships among educationally disadvantaged women's educational aspirations and expectations, their persistence in adult education and literacy programs, and their transition to college in the context of non-traditional educational trajectories that have been shaped by systems of gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class stratification and subordination.

Historically, most research investigating educational aspirations and expectations has been focused on white adolescent males who are high school students. Similarly, most research that has addressed women's educational aspirations and expectations has focused on adolescents who are middle school or high school students or on women who are white, middle-class college students. In other words, most research investigating women's educational aspirations and expectations has done so in the context of traditional, rather than non-traditional, educational trajectories. Alternatively, most research that has addressed the experiences of educationally disadvantaged women *has focused on* identifying the reasons they "dropped-out" of school as adolescents or on describing the "barriers" they face as adults attempting to attain a GED or Adult High School Diploma. But very little is known about the educational aspirations and expectations of women who are educationally disadvantaged, about the social processes through which their educational aspirations and expectations are cultivated, or about how systems of social stratification have shaped their non-traditional educational trajectories.

My interest in this project is grounded in my own educational experiences. The first in my family to graduate from high school and the first to attend college, I have followed a non-traditional educational trajectory to doctoral candidacy. In the process of doing so, I have established a long and intimate relationship with literacy, with people who struggle to learn and those who are committed to teaching them. I was a student in an adult education and literacy program myself for a year immediately prior to enrolling in undergraduate studies at the age of forty-one. Beginning college as the single, welfare reliant mother of two daughters, I attained a bachelor's degree majoring in sociology and women's studies from Indiana University in 1998; then a master's degree in women's studies from The Ohio State University in 2000; and achieved candidacy for the Ph.D. in sociology at Northeastern University in the fall of 2007.

As an undergraduate, I completed 27 semester credit-hours in college writing courses, beginning with developmental writing. During my last four years as an undergraduate, I worked as a tutor in my University's writing center, primarily with students who were as underprepared as I once had been. After attaining my master's degree, I returned to my undergraduate alma mater and taught developmental writing there for two years—the very same developmental writing course that I myself had taken less than a decade before. Since moving to Boston to pursue my Ph.D. in feminist sociology, I have taught writing at Suffolk University, Community ESL for the English Language Center at Northeastern University, and I have worked as both a volunteer and a part-time paid teacher in adult education and literacy programs in several Boston neighborhoods over the past five years.

Hence, I have experienced and observed, both as a student and as a teacher, the full range of barriers faced by women who, because of their social, economic, and political disadvantage, are both undereducated and educationally underprepared. These barriers are now well documented in the literature, making a significant contribution to what is known

about the experiences of women who are educationally disadvantaged. What is not known, however, is why, when there obviously is so much against them, they try anyway . . . or why, against all odds—some of them make it. This is what I argue needs to be explained.

Therefore, this dissertation addresses an old problem—the non-traditional educational trajectories of disadvantage women—from a new perspective: that of *their* educational aspirations and expectations. The research questions I have formulated, the research design I have developed, and the analysis I have executed are informed by my own experiences with education and by what I have learned from teaching underprepared women college students and educationally disadvantaged women in adult education and literacy programs. This experience has made me unusually well qualified to design and successfully execute this dissertation research project.

#### BACKGROUND AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

For decades, feminist educators and researchers have been working toward expanding access to all levels of education for all women. Two of the earliest feminist scholars Mary Wollstonecraft (in the 18th century) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (in the 19th century) grounded their broader arguments for democratic equality in the principle of women's access to education. Congruently, second-wave feminist scholarship is replete with references to women's access to education as a primary principle of feminist praxis. Currently, women in the United States are entering higher education and subsequently graduating with baccalaureate and master's degrees at rates that surpass those of men (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006; Jacobs 1996). In addition, women are now more likely to enter graduate school than are men and are earning 49 percent of doctoral and law degrees and 47 percent of medical degrees (Buchmann, DiPrete, and McDaniel 2008). However, when differences of race/ethnicity are taken into consideration, although the *gender gap* favoring women in educational attainment is even wider *within* particular racial/ethnic

groups (i.e., between men and women who are represented within each of the racial/ethnic groups of African Americans, Native Americans, or Latinos), *disparities in educational attainment between these racial/ethnic groups and whites are widening* (Kao and Thompson 2003; Kelly 2005).

Although 75 percent of all high school students are now graduating on time, only half of black or Latino students do so, making them ineligible for admission to higher education because they have not yet completed high school (Kelly 2005). High dropout rates translate into low rates of educational attainment: Whites are, on average, twice as likely to finish college as are racial/ethnic minorities (Kao and Thompson 2003). This reflects the low educational attainment rates of blacks and Latinos over their long-term educational trajectories: Only 6 percent of Latinos and 16 percent of blacks who enter kindergarten eventually earn a bachelor's degree, compared to 30 percent of whites and 49 percent of Asians (Bohon, Johnson, and Gorman 2006). Hence, across all levels of education the lowest levels of educational attainment are found among highly subordinated racial/ethnic groups (Kelly 2005). Although women in all racial/ethnic groups have gained in educational attainment *relative to men of their group*, the educational attainment of women of color (with the exception of Asian women) remains well below that of both white men and white women (U.S. Census Bureau 2008).

When women who have not attained a U.S. high school diploma do attempt to resume their formal schooling, they generally do so by enrolling in adult education and literacy programs; however, these programs historically have served a very small proportion of their target populations (Beder 1991; Quigley 1997). The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy indicated that 43 percent of all U.S. adults (or approximately 96,000,000 of them) could not demonstrate prose literacy skills above the basic level (Kutner, Greenberg, and Baer 2005). However, U.S. Department of Education (2006) data indicate that over the 2004-2005 academic year, fewer than 3,000,000 adults (54.7 percent

of them women) were enrolled in federally-funded, state-administered adult education and literacy programs. Like many other states, Massachusetts reflects this national disparity. Although Massachusetts has the most highly educated population in the United States, with 49.2 percent of its residents, age 25 to 64, having attained an associate degree or higher (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning 2008), forty-four percent of the State's adult population (or about two million people) have been identified by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as in need of adult education and literacy services (Liebowitz 2004).

Yet only 21,448 students, 61.8 percent of them women, were enrolled in adult education and literacy programs in Massachusetts in program year 2004-2005. Of this total enrollment, over half were enrolled in ESL programs (12,013); a little over 7,000 were enrolled at the basic education level, and only 2,118 were enrolled at the secondary level. In terms of race/ethnicity, about 2,500 of these adult students were Asian, and well over half (11,620) were African American/black or Hispanic/Latino (U.S. Department of Education 2007). Congruently, according to analysis of data from the National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (NEAEP), rates of attrition among those few students who are enrolled are extremely high. Half of all adult basic education students drop out before completing 10 weeks of instruction; only about 10 percent of adult basic education or adult secondary education students attend classes for a full year, and only 25 percent of ESL students do so (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone 1999). In other words, most of those who are accessing adult education and literacy programs are not persisting in them long enough to achieve the level of learning gains required to produce a meaningful improvement in their long-term educational trajectories.

Disparities by race/ethnicity and social class persist as educationally disadvantaged students attempt to access higher education. Because the academic skills of graduates of adult education and literacy programs tend, on average, to be lower than those of

traditional high school graduates, their most likely point of access to higher education is the community college. Yet, paradoxically, although community colleges are known as "second chance" institutions, it is, in fact, those who have the lowest levels of educational attainment and the highest levels of educational need—the working poor and extremely poor, recent immigrants, welfare reliant mothers, the disabled, and the long-term unemployed—who are *least likely* to participate in community college programs (Bailey and Alfonso 2005; Grubb, Badway, and Bell 2003; Zafft, Kallenbach, and Spohn 2006). In other words, those who are the most educationally disadvantaged are the least likely to gain access. Because women, particularly women of color, are over-represented within all of these low-income groups, it is evident that race/ethnicity and social class intersect with gender in ways that compound their educational disadvantage.

Very low rates of transition to college among those who have earned alternative high school credentials are well documented in the adult education literature (Reder 1999; Grubb, Badway, and Bell 2003; Tyler 2005). Although very little research has investigated the transition of educationally disadvantaged women from adult education and literacy to post-secondary education, a small body of literature has examined the transition and attainment of GED holders: Based on analyses of nationally representative data, only 18 percent of women GED holders had attained more than one year of post-secondary education (Tyler, Murnane, and Willett 2003). Among women GED holders who were 24 years of age, not more than one-half of one percent (i.e., five out of every thousand women GED holders) had obtained at least an associate degree (Tyler 2005).

Studies consistently have shown that most women who graduate from adult education and literacy programs have cultivated post-secondary level educational aspirations; however, the vast majority never transfer to a community college program, and the few who do so overwhelmingly demonstrate very low rates of persistence, most never attaining a degree nor achieving their longer-range educational goals (Reder 1999). Adult

education students who do transition to post-secondary education join a growing population of low-income adults in higher education. According to the 1999-2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 40 percent of adult students 25 years or older had annual incomes of less than \$25,000. Of those low-income students who began college in 1995-1996 with the intention of earning a bachelor's degree, only 7 percent had done so by 2001, six years later. In contrast, 42 percent of traditional students had done so during this period (Cook and King 2004).

In the past several decades, public policy-makers have expressed increasing concern that levels of educational attainment and literacy proficiency in the United States are too low to produce the highly-skilled, highly-educated workforce needed to retain a competitive edge in a globalizing marketplace that is becoming increasingly technological. Although the accuracy of this assessment is a matter of scholarly debate (Handel 2003; Lafer 2002), this concern was institutionalized into federal policy in 1998 when the administration of the adult education and literacy system was transferred from the U.S. Department of Education to the U.S. Department of Labor through the provisions of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act. Hence, a closer alignment between adult education and literacy and workforce development was accomplished. This federal legislation informed public policy debates at state levels as well. A report commissioned by the Massachusetts Institute for a New Economy (MassINC) in 2000 indicated that more than one-third of the state's workforce had not cultivated the skill levels needed to support full participation in the state's increasingly knowledge-based economy. The report concluded that expanding access to adult education and literacy services should be established as a necessary component of any strategy to increase the effectiveness of the state's workforce development policy (Comings, Sum, and Uvin 2000).

The comprehensive state-level reform effort that was initiated through the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in response to these recommendations

has had a profound effect on the state's adult education and literacy system. Because reforms have mandated national reporting requirements for states, complying with these new policies has intensified pressure on programs to provide a broader range of higher quality services to greater numbers of students—a perennial dilemma in the field of adult education and literacy that as early as the 1950s was termed by Burton Clark "the enrollment economy" (Rockhill 1982; Wikeland, Reder, and Hart-Landsberg 1992). However, as the discussion above indicates, adult education and literacy programs in Massachusetts (as well as across the nation) have found it very difficult to meet these new federal and state policy mandates. One important reason for this is that very little is known about the relationships that exist among program retention and completion and student participation and persistence. As Rockhill (1982) has argued, although "participation is one of the most frequently researched topics in adult education" (26), most studies have used survey research techniques that describe the characteristics of students and/or identify barriers to participation, but fail to sufficiently explain the relationship between the two.

Researchers in the field have been identifying the need for theory formulation to support explanatory research on persistence since the early 1990s (Beder 1991; Comings, Parrella, and Soricone 1999; Quigley 1997; Wikeland, Reder, and Hart-Landsberg 1992). To complicate this issue, one of the most distinctive features of adult education and literacy as an area of scholarly inquiry is that there is no generally accepted working definition of what adult education actually is or should be (Demetrion 2005), nor any consensus as to the purposes and goals of adult education and literacy (Beder 1999; Demetrion 2005), which has resulted in the absence of any disciplinary cohesiveness more generally (Hayes 2000). Thus, as characterized by Finger and Asun (2001): "Adult education has never been an intellectually coherent and unified field. It has very diverse theoretical foundations, which have never been integrated, either theoretically or conceptually" (p. 2). Because of these limitations, researchers in the field overwhelmingly rely on human capital theory as an

explanatory framework for answering empirical questions related to participation and persistence. However, because human capital theory explains participation and persistence from a purely economic perspective, it cannot explain many socio-cultural dimensions of participation and persistence that have been identified as equally important (Sparks 2002).

The policy changes outlined above have also had a dramatic effect on students, particularly women students, because a woman's decision to enroll in an adult education and literacy program is often intimately linked to her sense of self and to the formation of her identity (Horsman 1990; Luttrell 1997; Rockhill 1990; Tisdell 2001). Although adult education policy has been based on a human capital development model and "human capital development theory has become the dominant rationale for all public subsidy of adult education" (Beder qtd. in Demetrion 2005:10; Reder 1999), women who are educationally disadvantaged often articulate a broad range of educational goals, many of which are not directly linked to employment outcomes or to economic gains. At the same time, making measurable progress toward reaching their own educational goals has been identified as an important support to student persistence (Comings, Parrella, and Soricone 1999). However, our understanding of the social processes through which educationally disadvantaged women translate their educational aspirations and expectations into short-term and longer-range educational goals remains severely underdeveloped.

Therefore, in terms of both academic achievement and transition to post-secondary education, adult education and literacy students are at a severe disadvantage; moreover, the vast majority of educationally disadvantaged adults are not gaining access to the adult education and literacy system. Currently in the United States, more than 56,000,000 women who are in need of adult education and literacy services are not receiving them (Kutner, Greenberg, and Baer 2005). Because of this, most educationally disadvantaged women are unable to earn the educational credentials required to compete for living wage work in today's competitive labor markets. Equally important, they often do not have the

opportunity to develop the academic skills nor the analytical and critical thinking skills that are increasingly necessary for navigating our highly complex, knowledge-based society or for interrogating the social organization of this society. One result of this is that women of color continue to be highly *overrepresented* among the educationally disadvantaged and among the working (and welfare) poor—and highly *underrepresented* among college students. If the feminist goal of achieving access to all levels of education for all women is to be fully realized, then the academic and intellectual needs of educationally disadvantaged women must be more fully met by the adult education and literacy system, and their transition to college more successfully facilitated. Achieving this feminist goal will require a fuller understanding of how educationally disadvantaged women's educational aspirations and expectations are cultivated in the context of their non-traditional educational trajectories. Because the findings from this investigation advance these understandings, I consider this to be the most important contribution made by my dissertation research project.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this section, I define the primary concepts used in the study—educational values, educational aspirations, and educational expectations. I also briefly discuss their origins and the relationships that have been theorized among them. I then review qualitative research findings from a body of literature that has investigated the experiences of educationally disadvantaged women who were participating in adult education and literacy programs or in vocational training programs, focusing on the values and meanings these women attached to education in the context of their participation.

### Sociological Concepts

As Spenner and Featherman (1978) established in their early review of the literature focusing on "achievement ambitions" or motivations toward educational and/or occupational

goals, "level of aspiration has become the modal ambition concept in the sociological literature" (p. 375). Research that has investigated ambitions or motivations has been informed by expectancy-value formulations first developed in psychology, particularly by Bandura (1986). A large body of influential research in psychology that centered on explaining "achievement motivations" was primarily informed by these early theoretical understandings. However, as a sociological concept "level of aspiration" comes from Lewin (1951) who defined aspirations as the outcome of subjective assessments of the probability for reaching some valued goal along a continuum of ease/difficulty shaped *within a particular social context or set of social arrangements*, which he termed "field." In other words, Lewin's understanding was more sociological in the sense that he was interested in how social environments shaped individual assessments of the probability for reaching a goal and the effect these "fields" then had on individual level of aspiration.

Lewin was concerned with explaining aspirations in general; however, as is the case with most research that focuses on aspirations in the sociology of education, this study is primarily concerned with "educational aspirations," which are aspirations specifically aimed toward the goal of achieving a particular level of educational attainment or of earning a recognized educational credential; "educational expectations" are subjective assessments of the probability of reaching this educational goal. The transmission of educational values is central to the equation because, in this formulation, it is ultimately the value placed on the educational goal that is considered the primary motivator for the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. What is most significant about a sociological understanding of educational aspirations and expectations is the emphasis placed on explicating the social contexts within which, and the social arrangements through which, educational aspirations and expectations are cultivated. In this study, these social arrangements are conceptualized as integrated social processes that evolve over the life course, operating within systems of

social stratification that are organized to produce gender, age, racial/ethnic and social class subordination.

Although most researchers acknowledge the relevance of educational aspirations and expectations to academic achievement and educational attainment, the relationships among these variables are not well understood (Kao and Thompson 2003). Although previous research has established that educationally disadvantaged women place a very "high value" on education (Haleman 2004; Newman 2000; Rivera 2008), the social processes through which these educational values are transmitted, and how these values are then translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations, remains unclear. Although, conceptually, the importance of values is almost taken for granted in the sociological literature that addresses educational aspirations and expectations, Hitlin and Piliavin (2004) found in their review of the concept that "there is little coherence between the different approaches used across conceptualization and measurement of values" (p. 360). Still, almost every investigation of educational aspirations and expectations has relied on some conceptualization of the transmission of educational values.

#### Qualitative Research Findings

Although few studies have taken as their primary objective an investigation of the educational aspirations and/or expectations of educationally disadvantaged women, a number of studies have provided noteworthy findings in the process of executing broader explorations of educationally disadvantaged women's experiences with education and/or training. The welfare reform literature contains a small body of qualitative findings that focus on welfare reliant mothers' experiences attempting to access adult education and/or vocational training programs in a welfare policy context that promotes work and discourages education. In addition, the adult education and literacy literature contains a small but influential body of qualitative findings that have addressed many issues related to educationally disadvantaged women's experiences in adult education and literacy programs.

Because these two bodies of literature address similar issues across populations that are often overlapping, I review these findings simultaneously.

Although the absence of educational opportunities is one of the main barriers to educationally disadvantaged women's social mobility, the full impact of these barriers on the cultivation of their educational aspirations and expectations can only be understood in relationship to how these women understand their responsibilities as parents who are often the sole providers and protectors of their dependent children (Scarborough 2001; Megivern 2003). For many low-income women, particularly those who are alone and isolated in urban centers where concentrated poverty and high crime rates are the norm, worry about their own safety and the safety of their children may severely compromise the cultivation of both their educational and occupational aspirations and expectations (Nettles 1991). However, there is also evidence that children provide a powerful incentive for the cultivation of educational aspirations, and educationally disadvantaged women have identified the provision of a role model for their children as one of their primary reasons for pursuing education (Christopher 2005; Haleman 2004; Rivera 2008).

Several researchers have investigated whether educationally disadvantaged women's values concerning education are congruent with those of the dominant culture; both Newman (2000) and Haleman (2004) found that these values were in fact congruent. In addition, they found that their respondents, for the most part, subscribed to the belief that there is an open opportunity structure in America and that anyone who works hard can make it. Newman (2000) described respondents' attributions of success or failure as "extremely individualistic," (p. 39) and Haleman (2004) notes that her respondents "attributed the possibility of failure to personal factors rather than structural ones" (p. 779). Iversen and Farber (1996) who studied poor urban black women also found that their respondents expressed values about education and work that mirrored those of the broader

culture; however, their respondents expressed more ambivalence about the availability (and fairness) of educational and occupational opportunity structures.

Although educationally disadvantaged women value education as a strategy for achieving upward mobility, many express "doubts" about the availability of educational opportunities, leading to lower expectations (Liu et al. 1999; Bullock and Limbert 2003). A number of researchers have also found that although many educationally disadvantaged women have cultivated relatively high educational aspirations, their corresponding educational expectations are relatively low (Liu, Gold and Srivastava 2000; Liu et al. 1999; Bullock and Limbert 2003). Several researches have noted that educationally disadvantaged women's educational *expectations* (i.e., what they believe it will be possible to achieve) are often incongruent with their educational *aspirations* (i.e., what they hope to achieve). Internal attributions for success or failure have also proved to be important variables, and several researchers have found that the most successful women rated their "personal ambition" (Van Stone, Nelson, and Niemann 1994), their "own perseverance" (Thompson 1993), or "self-confidence and personal initiative" (Medley et al. 2005) as the most important factors influencing their educational achievement.

In addition, Scarbrough (2001) found that the educationally disadvantaged women she interviewed, all of whom were enrolled in a community college program, had acquired a very acute understanding of their own disadvantage and of the structural forces that contributed to that disadvantage. Horsman (1990) found that the white, working-class women from rural Nova Scotia that she interviewed often "commented on the lack of jobs even for those with qualifications" (p. 119) and expressed a keen awareness of pervasive joblessness among the poorly educated in the Maritimes. These women are also described as being "sure" that a high school credential (i.e., a "grade twelve" in Canada) is an artificial requirement established by employers and ultimately irrelevant to the skills required to perform the work. Congruently, Luttrell's (1997) *black* interview respondents held the view

that educational credentials have definitive limits in terms of their return to black people: "They 'knew plenty of black people with educations that have jobs that are no better than the [service jobs] we got here'" (p. 2). In these accounts, educational and occupational *expectations* appear to be linked in predictable ways to educational and occupational *aspirations*—as expectations decrease, aspirations do also.

Self-blame for poor educational and occupational outcomes juxtaposed with critical analysis of systemic social, economic, and political disadvantage, was a prevalent theme in many of these accounts. Women struggled to reconcile these contradictions. The Nova Scotian women in Horsman's study routinely described the material conditions that had made it difficult for them to continue their schooling or to persist in adult education and literacy programs; however, once having described these conditions, they "proceeded to blame themselves for being so foolish as to fail to make a good 'choice' to stay" (p. 147). Although the black women in Luttrell's (1997) study articulated an awareness of structural inequalities (e.g. institutionalized racism, systemic economic disadvantage, substandard schooling), their attributions for the absence of mobility in their lives centered on their own "character flaws and personal traits" (p. 41).

Rivera (2008) revealed that the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in her ethnography had often spoken of all of the "mistakes" they had made that led to their problems with income and housing (p. 211). One of the white women that Luttrell (1997) interviewed expressed the view that "schools reproduce class inequalities," but emphasized her own acquiescence to such an arrangement, blaming herself for her acceptance of such conditions—this woman decided while still in school that she was not "college material" (p. 47); both the white women and the black women actively reconciled their failures and successes—and subsequent aspirations—with their class positions, though in different ways. The process of making sense of their class positions in relationship to their educational disadvantage often created internal contradictions for these women. Although

they knew their educational choices had been limited, they frequently blamed themselves for their educational disadvantage.

Internal attributions for failure were also often juxtaposed against themes of "worthiness," sometimes in terms of the "right" to be educated and often in relationship to the development of self-confidence. These studies suggest that as a woman's self-confidence as a learner increases, her sense of being worthy of an education also increases (Dowdy 2003; Gladden, Rivera, and Russell 2000; Rivera 2008). Rockhill (1990) found that the Latinas she interviewed—most of whom were recent immigrants—linked literacy instruction to their abilities to fulfill family responsibilities when they first entered their adult education and literacy program, but never spoke of their "right" to learn English (as their husbands often did). However, at the point that participation in the program was no longer conceptualized as simply "learning to speak, read or write English but as 'going to school,'" the women began to develop greater self-confidence leading to the "desire" to be educated (p. 95). The black women that Dowdy (2003) interviewed (all of whom were participants in a GED program) came to hold "convictions about their worthiness" that evolved from their experience of adult education and the higher levels of self-confidence they achieved through participation (p. 64).

Luttrell (1997) notes that "adult education is about establishing a credible, worthy self and public identity as much as it is about gaining a diploma" (p. 126). Congruently, Rockhill (1990) argues that "literacy is a social practice, as well as a discursive and ideological practice, and it symbolizes becoming 'educated'" (p. 104). The contradictory impulses of resistance to and struggle for education is one of the core themes that can be traced throughout this scholarship. Rockhill (1997) has characterized this as the tension that results from understanding literacy and education as both a "threat" (i.e., resistance to . . . ) and a "desire" (i.e., struggle for . . . ) education. In terms of resistance, Dowdy (2003) found that her interview respondents had earlier rejected schooling to preserve a

sense of self, even though they had the intellectual potential to have been high-performing students. Luttrell (1997) found that both the black women and the white women she studied were taught—through "the push and pull of school"—about "their personal limits and social standing in schools that had failed to recognize their potential" (p. 110). The struggle "to become somebody . . ." was articulated as a unifying theme throughout these accounts (Luttrell 1997:3; Horsman 1990:94; Rockhill 1990:104-105). Although the women learners who participated in these studies were often *highly* motivated to "become somebody," they also faced insurmountable obstacles in their daily lives that worked against the possibility of achieving these ambitions.

One of the greatest obstacles to schooling and education faced by the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in these studies was the experience of violence and trauma. Domestic violence was a major barrier to women's participation in education and employment. Among the homeless women learners who participated in Rivera's (2008) ethnography, men who were intimates imposed some of the greatest barriers to educational access and attainment in the women's lives. According to these findings, women's participation in education is a challenge to the personal power that men who are their intimates have over them, which increases women students' risk of physical and psychological violence as well as material deprivation (Horsman 1990). Rockhill (1990) noted that many of the women learners she interviewed lived with daily violence (and overwork) so severe that they found it "almost impossible to find the energy to move in new directions"; participation in education brought increased threat of violence because men often perceived it as a challenge to their power in the relationship (p. 103).

In the studies that addressed welfare reform's influence on the lives of educationally disadvantaged women (Gladden, Rivera, and Russell 2000; Rivera 2008), respondents' determination to achieve independence from the welfare system was often integrated with their educational and occupational aspirations. These women were convinced that obtaining

a high school education would provide an opportunity of securing a living wage job, moving off welfare, and/or entering a good job training program or beginning college (Rivera 2008). At the same time, these findings indicated that many educationally disadvantaged women, regardless of race/ethnicity, had acquired almost no working knowledge of how educational and occupational opportunity structures are organized or how they are accessed (Horsman 1990; Luttrell 1997; Rivera 2008; Rockhill 1990). Most of the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in these studies had little or no peer-contact with professionals from whom they could learn about how these structures operate, about how to access them or to negotiate relationships within them.

Moreover, educationally disadvantaged women often cultivated educational and occupational aspirations toward ends that were only vaguely conceptualized or articulated. Rockhill (1990) found that the women she studied mentioned becoming secretaries, going into nursing or teaching, but what they emphasized was what they wanted to get away from—"field, domestic or factory work" (p. 104). As Horsman (1990) concluded from her analysis, "the women were not certain about what job they wanted to do; they simply wanted to be free of worries about survival, and they were certain that education is the route that will get them there" (p. 90). In other words, these women believed that there was a direct link between educational attainment and greater work opportunities, but they had a limited understanding of what these work opportunities might be or of precisely how educational attainment was linked to them.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The foregoing discussion provides a socio-political context for the research questions guiding this inquiry. Specifically, this discussion demonstrates the relevance of considering educational aspirations and expectations as significant factors influencing women's non-traditional educational trajectories through processes of the transmission of educational values. This discussion also establishes the necessity of explaining how systems of gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination put women, particularly women of color, at serious disadvantage as they attempt to act upon their educational aspirations. Finally, this discussion establishes the importance of investigating how the educational aspirations and expectations of educationally disadvantaged women are shaped by broader social processes and institutional arrangements. Thus, given these parameters, this dissertation addresses the following research questions:

- Why do educationally disadvantaged women value education—how are these values transmitted, and what are the social processes through which they are translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations?
- What are the broader social processes and institutional arrangements that shape educationally disadvantaged women's educational aspirations and expectations?
- How are systems of gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class stratification implicated in the development of educationally disadvantaged women's non-traditional educational trajectories?

## THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Two dominant theories, both developed as models for explaining broader social mobility patterns, have frequently been used to investigate educational aspirations and expectations—status-attainment theory (Blau and Duncan 1967) and human capital theory (Becker 1964, 1993). However, both of these theories have serious limitations for providing an adequate explanation of the educational aspirations and expectations of women who are educationally disadvantaged; I briefly outline these limitations below. In the following section, I discuss feminist standpoint theory—the overriding theoretical framework used for this study—and explain why feminist standpoint theory was useful for moving beyond these limitations. In the concluding chapter of the dissertation (Chapter 8), I offer a feminist critique of both status-attainment theory and human capital theory in the context of the major findings of this dissertation research project.

Although the status-attainment model establishes the importance of considering the transmission of educational values through family socialization processes (Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969; Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf 1970; Kerckhoff 1976), its limitations for explaining the educational aspirations and expectations (or the social mobility patterns) of women and racial/ethnic minorities have been well documented in the literature (Hanson 1994). As Kaufman and Richardson (1982) argued in one of the first feminist critiques of the achievement motivation research that informed this model:

Motivation is a function of two forces: expectancy, the subjective probability of attaining a goal; and value, the anticipated gratification associated with that goal. In the achievement motivation research, gender role affects both value and expectancy, which in turn affect aspiration. In addition, over time and over the individual life course both value and expectancy change. (P. 92)

Educational outcomes are the product of integrated social processes that are complex, dynamic, and longitudinal. When gender, age, race/ethnicity and/or social class are taken into consideration, as they are in this study, the transmission of educational values is related to the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations in multi-dimensional

ways that cannot be adequately explained by the status-attainment model because it does not address systems of social stratification; therefore, it offers no explanation of the ways these systems shape the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. As argued by Kao and Tienda, "understanding how aspirations are formed and how they change over time is crucial for clarifying why educational aspirations eventuate in highly diverse educational outcomes along race, ethnic and gender lines" (1998:350). In other words, it is crucial that any comprehensive explanation of the transmission of educational values and the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations consider the implications of systems of social stratification and subordination as well as the dynamic and longitudinal nature of these social processes as they evolve over the life course.

Human capital theory, on the other hand, understands educational aspirations as an outcome of the economic cost-benefit calculations individuals often use to assess the exchange value of educational skills and credentials in the labor market. However, women's educational attainment and academic achievement, on average, surpass that of men's, even though women's market returns to education—their occupational status and earned income—remain considerably lower (Jacobs 1996; Mickelson 1989, 2003; Adelman 1991). Because of this incongruence, women's educational success has often been characterized as anomalous. But as Mickelson has argued, "women's educational success appears anomalous only if we seek to understand it by relying on theories of action that are based on the worldviews (*habitus*) and life circumstances (*field*) of men" (2003:374).

The educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study clearly understood that there is a direct link between educational attainment and greater work opportunities; however, this understanding was but one dimension of a much broader multidimensional process—there was much more going on for these women than the straightforward economic cost-benefit calculation that human capital theory postulates, precisely *because they were women*. Human capital theory ignores how the gendered

organization of society alters the anticipated costs and benefits of both education and work for women. Although women employ economic cost-benefit calculations as they are making rational choices about education, they do so within a particular socio-historical context; therefore, the nature of these calculations, and the standards of judgment women are using to make them, are often configured very differently than those of men. Moreover, when age, race/ethnicity, and/or social class are considered along with gender, an even more complex picture evolves.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY

The analysis developed in this dissertation moves beyond the limitations outlined above by adopting feminist standpoint theory as the overriding theoretical framework for the study. Feminist standpoint theories are critical theories that originated in the early phases of the contemporary women's movement as women participated in consciousness-raising groups where they shared their experiences with other women, critically reflected on these experiences, and, through this method, developed explanations for how and why women were oppressed as women (Hartsock 1998:19; Smith 1977:11; 1987:58). Smith has often described the experience of consciousness-raising within the women's movement as one of women struggling to develop a language through which to speak to each other as knowers and to do so authoritatively (1990:2). Thus, feminist standpoint theories focus on explaining the relationship between the acquisition of knowledge and the exercise of power. Standpoint theorists have centered on formulating theories of knowledge, consciousness, and power that explicate the ways in which members of dominated groups come to understand and resist oppression/subordination. Although there are important differences in the particular understandings of standpoint theorists, this section outlines the theoretical propositions that inform this dissertation, defining it as a standpoint project. The methodological assumptions that follow from these theoretical propositions, including their

epistemological underpinnings, are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 where I outline my methodological approach to inquiry and the methods I used to collect data and analyze the women's educational life histories.

### Standpoint Theories of Knowledge

Standpoint theorists advance the proposition that "knowledge is always socially situated" (Harding 2004:7): Different groups develop knowledge that is grounded in gender, racial/ethnic, and social class differences as well as in specific historical eras, socio-cultural contexts, and political milieus. As such, the knowledge produced by the dominant group is very different than that produced by those groups that are dominated. In short, different relationships to domination lead to different life circumstances and social realities, all of which ultimately lead to qualitatively different knowledges. Because dominated groups are forced to function within both of these social realities—that of the dominant group and that of their own—dominated groups have a distinct opportunity to develop a comprehensive knowledge of the organization of their oppression; these groups also have the potential to use this knowledge to their political advantage in an effort to resist subordination.

Based on an interpretation of Marx's dialectical method, Hartsock (1998:107) has argued that "if material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect that the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse"—i.e., will be distorted. Harding (2004) has summed up the logic of the proposition thus . . .

to the extent that an oppressed group's situation is different from that of the dominant group, its dominated situation enables the production of distinctive kinds of knowledge. . . . Each oppressed group can learn to identify its distinctive opportunities to turn an oppressive feature of the group's conditions into a source of critical insight about how the dominant society thinks and is structured. Thus, standpoint theories map how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemological, scientific, and political advantage" (p. 7-8).

Therefore, a standpoint is a *potential* political position that subordinated groups are able to adopt in the process of achieving a critical understanding of the causes and consequences of their oppression; however, this social process is not automatic nor inevitable: "The vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement which requires both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate, and the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations" (Hartsock 1998:107-108). Hence, a standpoint is not a personal viewpoint nor individual perspective, but rather *a social and political process* that presents possibilities for developing forms and strategies of resistance as members of dominated groups come to view their experience of oppression as an experience held in common with others who are members of their oppressed group.

Because the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study are represented within various dominated groups by gender, age, race/ethnicity, and social class, all of which experience oppression, they often encounter both the conditions and the possibilities for adopting a feminist standpoint. This is not to argue that these women identify as feminists; most do not. It is to argue, however, that as they resist the social, economic, and political constraints placed upon them by the dominant culture, they create the conditions of possibility for interrogating, explaining, and resisting gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination, a political struggle that presents them with opportunities for achieving a standpoint as it is defined below.

#### Standpoint Theories of Consciousness

Grounded in the theory of knowledge outlined above, the following notions of the organization of human subjectivity and consciousness have been promoted by standpoint theorists: "The subjects who matter are not individual pre-existing subjects who are simply human beings, but subjects who are defined by their relation to larger, collective subjects, or groups" (Hartsock 1998:79). The consciousness that arises from achieving a standpoint

is always divided against itself as members of oppressed groups mediate between the social realities they actually experience and distortions of those realities that are imposed upon them by the dominant group. However, Smith (1996) has cautioned that the proposition that knowledge evolves from the experience of social life does not translate into an approach that takes experience *as knowledge*. Experience, which Smith has identified as the "only site of consciousness" (p. 72), is understood as a place to begin inquiry, not a place to conclude it. In arguably one of her most clearly articulated expressions of this position she states:

The object of sociological inquiry is not order nor action as such, but the ongoing coordinating or concerting of actual people's activities. Consciousness, subjectivity, the subject, are hence always embedded, active, and constituted in, the concerting of people's activities with each other . . . Hence the social must be conceived as an ongoing process. . . . (P. 172)

Similarly, drawing from de Lauretis, Hartsock (1998) has cautioned that "this consciousness is not universal or coextensive with human thought. It is historically determined, yet is achieved in a process of struggle and interpretation, a 'rewriting of self . . . in relation to a new understanding of community, of history, of culture'" (de Lauretis qtd. in Hartsock 1998:233). Consciousness is most accurately conceived as a vehicle for interpreting the historical relevance of a group's experience of oppression—"the only site of consciousness."

Hence, consciousness is never a completed product, but always a process of dialectical relations in progress, an arrangement that provides the opportunity for a "shift in historical consciousness" (Hartsock 1998:233). This shift opens a space for resistance of domination where the dual, bifurcated, and/or multiple consciousness that results from this shift can be given political expression, ultimately aimed at using power to effect change, both individually and collectively. Collins (2000) has described this process in relationship to the experiences of black women:

The significance of the hegemonic domain of power lies in its ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies. As Black women's struggles for self-definition suggest, . . . reclaiming the "power of a

free mind" constitutes an important area of resistance. Thus, the hegemonic domain becomes a critical site for not just fending off hegemonic ideas from dominant culture, but in crafting counter-hegemonic knowledge that fosters changed consciousness. Regardless of the actual social locations where this process occurs—families, community settings, schools, religious institutions, or mass media institutions—the power of reclaiming these spaces for "thinking and doing not what is expected of us" constitutes an important dimension of Black women's empowerment. (P. 285)

Although Collins focuses here on the experiences of black women, "struggles for self-definition" are apparent in the accounts of women from other racial/ethnic groups as well. In this study, an understanding of the significance of the "power of a free mind" was also demonstrated by a number of Latinas and Irish American women as well as black women.

#### Standpoint Theories of Power and Resistance

As noted above, there are important differences in the understandings of standpoint theorists; however, a commonality among their views, one that informs this study, is that power and resistance constitute social processes that will always operate within dialectical relationship. As Hartsock (1998) notes drawing from Marx, in a dialectical relationship "each element conditions the others but each can also be understood as a different expression of the same relationships" (p. 93). Rather than restricting the definition of power to the concept of domination: the capacity to impose one's will on another (e.g., the classical Weberian definition), standpoint theorists focus on explaining the ways that both domination and resistance are conditioned by each other. Giroux (1983) has offered a dialectical, though relatively straight-forward definition of power that was advanced by Foucault in the late 1970s: "Power works so as to be exercised on and by people within different contexts that structure interacting relations of dominance and autonomy" (p. 108). This formulation has placed emphasis on the ways that both dominance and autonomy are shaped by each other depending on social context. For example, power exercised as domination in one context can become power exercised as autonomy in another; resistance to domination can

lead to empowerment in some social contexts, and autonomy can be exercised as domination in others.

Janeway (1980) has also developed a functional definition of power that is useful for standpoint projects—the power to "disbelieve." Similar to the views expressed by Collins in the section above, the power to disbelieve is used to resist the values, understandings, and beliefs of the dominant culture: "By disbelieving, one will be led toward doubting prescribed codes of behavior, and as one begins to act in ways that deviate from the norm in any degree, it becomes clear that in fact there is not just one right way to handle or understand events" (Janeway 1980:167). Both Janeway and Collins have argued that for women who experience intense forms of oppression that severely restrict their options and/or choices of response, exercising the "power of a free mind" (Collins 2000:285) or the "power to disbelieve" (Janeway 1980:167) may be the only forms or strategies of resistance available to them. As Collins (2004) has argued concerning black women who experience extreme oppression: "Individual women who in their consciousness choose to be self-defined and self-evaluating are, in fact, activists. . . . In this sense, consciousness can be viewed as one potential sphere of freedom, one that may exist simultaneously with unfree, allegedly conforming behavior (p. 114). Indeed, many of the women who participated in this study struggled to establish and maintain various forms of independence, and the struggle to exercise freedom of thought—i.e., thinking independently, was one of the most important of these forms of independence. At the same time, they often expressed values and beliefs that were aligned with those of the dominant culture.

Paradoxically, the dialectical relationship between power and resistance creates a rather ambiguous space where either can appear to be the other because each contains the opposite within it. bell hooks (2004) has captured this complexity in her descriptions of the dialectical relationship between margin and center. She has argued that marginality is "much more than a site of deprivation," but is at the same time "also *the site of radical*

*possibility*. . . —a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse" (p. 156-157; emphasis mine). Therefore, out of marginality (i.e., the social position of those who are dominated/oppressed), which is always juxtaposed against centrality (i.e., the social position of those who dominate/oppress), evolves a *potential* new way of viewing the world that "nourishes the capacity to resist." In other words, occupation of the margin allows for exploration of creative ways to resist domination and create alternatives. Based on this articulation of resistance, the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study can be understood as occupying this margin, a space where, through their experience of subordination, they are presented with the opportunity to resist domination by engaging in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

Smith (1987) has offered a unique perspective on resistance, drawing as she often does from her own experience. In doing so, she identifies a dimension of resistance that has often been overlooked by other theorists who have initiated standpoint projects. As a graduate student and as an academic, Smith was required to engage with the work of Freud and other men whose writing about women and female sexuality was considered authoritative. This presented a dilemma for her, as it did for many women of her era, because it meant not only engaging with these men's writing but engaging with their work as an authoritative account of "legitimate forms of relations between the sexes." When women challenged these understandings, they were accused of being defensive, pathological, or resistant. Smith exclaimed, these were "causes for precisely the cure laid out plainly before us: be other than you are!" In response to this experience, Smith wrote (and I quote her at length):

Surely the dilemma I had experienced in relation to the work of D.H. Lawrence was, in various forms and in various relations, a common one. I was constrained to acknowledge his work both as genius and as moral authority. His ultimate idealization of sexual relations between women and men was one where women's consciousness, her sensation, was so totally annulled before the man's that she would forego even orgasm and accept essentially the annihilation of her own consciousness in the sexual act. This totalitarian subordination, this annihilation of

*self, was something I resisted without knowing how to resist, but that rebellion at an earlier time had no ground to stand on, no rightful means of expression, and thus no authority for me. (P. 51; emphasis mine)*

Through her participation in the women's movement, a space was opened for interrogating this sexual repression, generating new ways of understanding the logics underlying the "totalitarian subordination" she had resisted to preserve a sense of self. But what is most unique about this account is Smith's retrospective insight that she had "resisted without knowing how to resist." Several of the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study were compelled to resist subordination without fully knowing how to resist. They also struggled to come to terms with the implications of their resistance as it began to change their sense of self and their relationship to family and community.

#### THE STANDPOINT OF EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED WOMEN

The educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study had three important things in common: 1) they all were either attending an adult education and literacy program or had successfully completed one and transitioned to college, 2) they all placed a very high value on education, and 3) they all were members of racial/ethnic groups that historically have been highly subordinated by the dominant culture in the United States, as well as in Boston—Cape Verdeans, Haitians, African Americans, Irish Americans, Puerto Ricans, Nicaraguans, and El Salvadorians—which presented them with distinct opportunities for developing a comprehensive knowledge of their oppression and for potentially using this knowledge to achieve a standpoint.

In addition, most of the women articulated educational aspirations for completing a college certificate or degree and held even higher expectations of their capacities for doing so. In short, all of these women projected very high levels of self-confidence and determination in the ability of education to enhance their lives and improve their social conditions. Although the women who participated in this study were exceptional in terms of

their valuation of education and their academic persistence, in most ways they were like many other educationally disadvantaged women students I've taught in adult education and literacy programs and in college developmental writing courses over the years. They had a lot going for them—but they had a lot going against them as well.

Five years ago, my first experiences teaching adult basic education to educationally disadvantaged women from some of Boston's poorest neighborhoods introduced me to both their academic and intellectual needs and potentials and to the incredible complexity of their social lives. It is hard to understand what not being minimally educated is like when you are someone who has grown accustomed to being well educated and to being regarded by others as such. It is also hard to understand how it might impact one's orientation to the social world to be intelligent enough to earn an advanced degree, but at the same time, not be able to read and write well or to successfully do fourth grade math, particularly in an urban center where half of all the other adults have college degrees. And for those of us who take our advanced literacy skills and proficiency in English for granted, it is hard to imagine language (or the lack of it) being influential enough to limit the parameters of our lives both socio-economically and culturally. However, these are precisely the social conditions under which educationally disadvantaged women, *particularly those who are most able*, experience their social lives and cultivate their educational aspirations and expectations. The educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study valued education because they believed it would provide them, as one 22 year old Irish American woman put it: "A way out of nowhere."

This dissertation investigates how the educational values that these women hold have been transmitted to them. In doing so, it examines both the sources of these values and the social processes through which they are translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. Many of the women's educational life histories included accounts of how education was regarded in their families of origin, and they spoke

of how members of their families had either facilitated or impeded their educational progress. Although sixteen women who participated in the study (or 80 percent of them) received educational encouragement from within their families of origin, thirteen (or 65 percent of them) dropped out of high school in spite of this encouragement. Although the women gave a number of different reasons for having done so, all were related in one way or another to family circumstances that were shaped by broader structural forces and institutional arrangements. Even for two women who identified overwhelming academic difficulties as their reasons for dropping out of school, family circumstances that had been shaped by broader socioeconomic factors provided the socio-cultural context for their academic challenges (and failures) as well as for the meanings they had attached to them.

At the same time, the women's accounts of their educational life histories revealed how global disasters like war and earthquakes, the personal traumas of family suicide and domestic violence, the upheaval of the social and cultural transitions of immigration, and the persistent economic hardships of being numbered among the working or welfare poor in a nation that is ostensibly full of opportunities, shaped their understandings of who they were and of what education both could and should mean to them in terms of increasing their life chances and improving the quality of their lives and those of their children.

In addition to investigating how educational values were transmitted to the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in the study, and how their educational aspirations and expectations were shaped by their individual life circumstances and their understandings of them, this dissertation also addresses how broader institutional arrangements (e.g., the organization of early schooling; the organization of work) shaped the women's educational aspirations and expectations as well as their occupational and professional goals and interests. These institutional arrangements were historically organized through systems of gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class stratification, eventuating in the women's socio-cultural and economic subordination. Therefore, the

dissertation also addresses the political implications of the knowledges that these women articulated and shows how this knowledge was being used (and could be used) toward the end of achieving a standpoint.

Paradoxically, often when the women made decisions about education that they believed were in their own interest based on their valuation of education, they did so in compliance with the values, beliefs, and expectations of the dominant culture, reinforcing the very institutional arrangements that had subordinated them. At the same time, their accounts of their educational life histories reflected instances or moments of resistance, identifying as well spaces that were opened for that resistance. The women took advantage of this space by challenging dominant values, beliefs, and expectations. In other words, when possible for them to do so, these women resisted oppression/subordination.

Educationally disadvantaged women frequently use the intellectual skills they have developed to interrogate the broader institutional arrangements that have shaped the circumstances of their own lives, and many demonstrate critical and analytical skills. This dissertation examines how the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study managed to cultivate educational aspirations and expectations that supported their persistence in adult education and literacy programs, and for some, their transition to college. The dissertation also shows how the transmission of educational values and the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations often provided opportunities for resisting continued subordination by the dominant group. As a 28 year old Latina—a woman who had dropped out of high school in the 9th grade and was just completing her second year of community college—replied when asked about her dreams for her children's education:

Well, I want them to finish school and not drop out like I did, but I also want them to go on to college like I've done. I want them to do what they want to do. If they want to be a teacher, go ahead, as long as it is positive. I want them to have real choices in life that are meaningful, and you have to have education for that.

I say to them "Mom is in college and doing a lot of work." I read to them every night. They have activity books that we do together, and I'm always on top of this, letting them know that education is very important for them. If you want to be a doctor, you have to be able to learn what doctors need to learn.

And I learned all of this parenting from this [adult education and literacy] program. Because I never had this at home; I didn't have anything like this from home, *and I want to break the cycle*. But when I really look back on it all now, how things went for me in school, it wasn't really my parents' fault. They didn't have an opportunity for school, for education, so how could they even know what it could do for you?

They weren't responsible. It wasn't really them. It was poverty and dead-end jobs and lousy landlords and just plain bad luck, but it wasn't them. Even though they didn't always do right by me, they did the best they could. *It wasn't really them, it was the cycle, and now I'm breaking it.*

Like all of the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study, this woman's comments indicate that she is fully aware that there is a direct link between educational attainment and greater socio-economic status and work opportunity. In addition, these comments clearly reflect a dominant cultural belief that is widely accepted in the United States—*that of education as the great equalizer—a panacea, the primary means for ameliorating poverty and achieving socio-economic equality both locally and nationally.*

On the other hand, this woman's comments also reflect the struggle to achieve a standpoint—she externalizes attributions for "the cycle." In this case, the dominant belief in a "cycle of intergenerational poverty" as perpetuated, according to this logic, through a "cycle of intergenerational illiteracy." Although this Latina recognizes that both her family of origin and her family of orientation have been caught up in "this cycle," and she understands her educational efforts as attempts at "breaking it," she is not prepared to accept responsibility for creating it (or for making it), nor is she prepared to hold her family of origin responsible. In other words, by interrogating the logics underlying her subordination this Latina resists by exercising both the "power of a free mind" and the "power to disbelieve." For this woman, challenging these logics requires a fuller consideration of alternative explanations.

This woman's comments also reflect the conceptualization of power that most of the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in the study articulated: "having real choices in life that are meaningful." In other words, having a range of viable options and being able to choose among them, thereby achieving a degree of autonomy. And like this Latina, most of the women who participated in the study believed that "you have to have education for that; . . . if you want to be a doctor, you have to be able to learn what doctors need to learn." On the one hand, these women had learned that educational credentials are a minimum requirement for many jobs and that most high status positions that provide substantial earned income require advanced skills and a college degree. At the same time, many of these women came to believe through their experience of subordination that they needed access to education, and they wanted it—some believed they had a right to it. On the other hand, many of these women also blamed themselves for not having taken advantage of educational opportunities in the past. As the Latina above makes clear concerning her dreams for her children: "I want them to finish school and not drop out like I did, but I also want them to go on to college like I've done."

As Hartsock (1998) has explained concerning Marx's understanding of social categories that are in dialectical relationship, "each not only appeared as its opposite but contained the opposite within it. Thus to give just one example, in a dialectical understanding of Marxist theory, it is evident that the means by which capitalism creates wealth are at the same time the means for the creation of poverty" (p. 169). Of course, Hartsock meant this example as a generalization of Marx's dialectical method, but it is applicable to this Latina's struggle to achieve a standpoint. Significantly, she uses "poverty" as a code for *economic domination*. This "poverty" she names also reflects instances of gender, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination by the dominant culture. The exercise of power in the form of economic domination creates a dialectical relationship, opening spaces for practicing resistance and for achieving a standpoint. As educationally

disadvantaged women develop analytical and critical thinking skills (e.g., through participation in adult education and literacy programs), they begin to challenge the definitions, assumptions, and underlying logics of the dominant culture, as this Latina has done. They also resist the consequences of these logics.

This dissertation examines how social processes of the transmission of educational values and the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations are mediated within the constraints placed upon educationally disadvantaged women through systems of gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination that are articulated in the values, beliefs, expectations, and economic interests of the dominant culture. Throughout the empirical chapters of the dissertation, women's accounts of their educational life histories show how they have developed understandings of the importance of education through their experience of family, school, and work, and how this experience has both shaped, and been shaped by, the cultivation of their educational aspirations and expectations. In addition, the dissertation shows how these women, all of whom are represented within groups that have been highly subordinated by the dominant culture, have resisted this subordination by struggling to achieve a standpoint

#### OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

To review, the research questions guiding the inquiry are as follows: 1) Why do educationally disadvantaged women value education—how are these values transmitted, and what are the social processes through which they are translated into educational aspirations and expectations? 2) What are the broader social processes and institutional arrangements that shape educationally disadvantaged women's educational aspirations and expectations? and 3) How are gender, age, race/ethnicity, and social class implicated in the development of educationally disadvantaged women's non-traditional educational trajectories?

Chapter 2 outlines the methodological approach and research design developed for the study. I review the methodological assumptions of feminist standpoint methodology, including their epistemological underpinnings. I also explain why feminist standpoint methodology was the best approach for answering my research questions and describe my relationship to the research project. The second section of the chapter focuses on outlining the research design, including a discussion of the data and a brief description of the program sites where they were collected. I also explain why these data were appropriate for answering my research questions. In addition, I discuss the methods used for data collection and provide a description of the women who participated in the study. Finally, I outline the methods used for data analysis.

Chapter 3 describes the educational aspirations and expectations articulated by the women who participated in the study, providing a demographic and educational profile of the group. In addition, I discuss the reasons the women gave for their educational aspirations, including how they linked these aspirations to their occupational and/or professional goals and interests. In the second section, I identify the institution of the family as one of the primary sources of the transmission of the women's educational values and explain how these values were transmitted to them through family socialization processes. I identify mothers and grandmothers as the most influential family members for transmitting educational values to daughters and granddaughters. I go on to explain how these values were transmitted through the social processes of requiring and enforcing school attendance and offering active encouragement in the form of explanatory frameworks that provided rationales for why education was important. I also explain how and why these explanatory frameworks differed by race/ethnicity. Finally, I show how the rationales used by mothers and grandmothers to convey the importance of education (i.e., their knowledges and understandings) created a space where resistance to gender, racial/ethnic, and/or social class subordination was possible. By initiating their daughters and granddaughters into

historical legacies of resistance against subordination, these mothers and grandmothers took advantage of opportunities for engaging in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

Chapter 4 describes the early schooling experiences of the women who participated in the study—their experiences in elementary and secondary school. Early schooling is considered a set of institutional arrangements and practices that provide a crucial social context for the transmission of educational values, one primarily influenced by dominant cultural values, beliefs, and expectations. I focus specifically on analyzing the women's early schooling experiences by race/ethnicity. The first section provides an analysis of the character and quality of these early schooling experiences in terms of their level of integration with family and explains how both positive and negative early schooling experiences were related to: 1) whether the woman was required and encouraged to attend school or not, 2) whether she received support, encouragement, and inspiration from teachers or not, and 3) whether she had dropped out of high school or not. This section also addresses how some women's early schooling experiences presented opportunities for resistance. The second section of the chapter describes the experiences of the women who had dropped out of high school, focusing on their reasons for doing so.

Chapter 5 addresses the work experiences of the women who participated in the study. I identify work as one of the primary sources of the transmission of the women's educational values and explain how educational values were transmitted to the women through their work experiences. The chapter focuses on explaining what the women learned about the importance of education, as well as about the organization of work, from their own work experiences and on showing how the experience of labor exploitation created spaces for the potential practice of resistance. I discuss the women's understandings of the link between educational attainment and work opportunity and explain how they were shaped by the women's work experiences and by the organization of work in the newly restructured economy. I also show how the women's experiences of labor exploitation

created opportunities for interrogating the organization of work and for challenging dominant cultural beliefs and understandings about the relationship between educational attainment and work opportunity.

Chapter 6 describes the later schooling experiences of the women who participated in the study—their experiences in adult education and literacy programs. Whereas early schooling experiences (Chapter 4) provided an important social context for the transmission of educational values, later schooling experiences in adult education and literacy programs provided an important social context for the translation of these educational values into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. Moreover, through their participation in adult education and literacy programs, the women often further developed their critical and analytical skills, and they used these skills to interrogate their experience of gender, age, racial/ethnic, and/or social class oppression/subordination. They also began to challenge the dominant cultural beliefs, values, and expectations that had created their educational disadvantage. The first section of the chapter focuses on the women's reasons for returning to school and provides an analysis of their experiences in their adult education and literacy programs. The second section of the chapter explains the social processes through which educational values were translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations in the context of schooling in adult education and literacy programs. The chapter also outlines how processes of the translation of educational values into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations created potential spaces for the active practice of resistance and opportunities for engaging in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

Chapter 7 addresses the broader purpose of the dissertation: to explain the relationships among educationally disadvantaged women's educational aspirations and expectations, their persistence in adult education and literacy programs, and their transition to college. The first section of the chapter focuses on explaining how the cultivation of the

women's educational aspirations and expectations shaped their persistence in adult education and literacy programs and facilitated the development of their critical and analytical thinking skills. The second section focuses on explaining how persistence in adult education and literacy programs shaped the women's transition to college. The chapter focuses on showing: 1) how educational aspirations and expectations cultivated through participation in adult education and literacy programs shaped the women's educational and occupational/professional goals and 2) how these goals supported both the women's persistence in their adult education and literacy programs and their transition to college. Adopting the identity of serious student and learning to produce a sustained academic effort were important processes for developing persistence. Teachers and academic counselors who conveyed academic expectations in the context of offering support and encouragement are identified as the most important organizational resource for developing academic persistence and facilitating transition. In addition, the chapter shows how the opportunity to build community with other educationally disadvantaged women in adult education and literacy programs was crucial for both the development of academic persistence and the development of a critical consciousness through which to resist gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination.

Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation. I summarize the major findings of the research project, outline future directions for research, and offer several policy recommendations. Finally, in the last section of the chapter, I offer a feminist critique of status attainment theory and human capital theory.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This dissertation makes a number of important contributions. First, as noted in the introduction, very little is known about the educational aspirations and expectations of women who are educationally disadvantaged. This has created a gap in the sociology of

education literature that focuses on educational aspirations and expectations more generally. Although educationally disadvantaged women of color make up a large proportion of those who are undereducated, research on the educational aspirations and expectations of racial/ethnic minorities continues to focus on analyses of the traditional educational trajectories of minority adolescents. By focusing on the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations of educationally disadvantaged women over the life course, my research findings begin to fill this gap in the sociology of education literature.

Second, because the dissertation is aimed at explaining the relationships that exist among educational aspirations and expectations, persistence in adult education and literacy programs, and transition to college, these findings will be useful to adult education policy makers and to adult education and literacy program administrators and practitioners. Again, as noted in the introduction, a great deal of research in adult education and literacy has focused on identifying barriers to students' persistence and transition to college. This research, on the other hand, identifies the strategies that educationally disadvantaged women have developed to successfully overcome these barriers, to persist in their adult education and literacy programs, and to transition to college.

Third, and most importantly, this dissertation makes an important contribution to feminist scholarship and praxis by focusing attention on the unmet academic and intellectual needs of women who are educationally disadvantaged. As bell hooks argued twenty-five years ago in her classic text on feminist theory:

There will be no mass-based feminist movement as long as feminist ideas are understood only by a well educated few. The educational needs of the under-educated woman must be considered by feminist activists if the written word remains the primary medium for the dissemination of feminist ideas. . . . As a group, women have been denied (via sex, race, and class exploitation and oppression) the right and privilege to develop intellectually. Most women are deprived of access to modes of thought that promote the kind of critical and analytical understanding necessary for liberation struggle. (P. 112-113)

I have taken this argument seriously in the development of this dissertation research project. It is precisely because of the political dedication of so many feminist scholars and educators that I have made it this far in my own educational journey. These women have taught me through example how education (and research) can and should be used as a political act of resistance—a standpoint. Hence, advancing feminist understandings of the personal and political significance of education and literacy in the lives of educationally disadvantaged women is the most important contribution made by this dissertation.

## CHAPTER 2: Methodology and Research Design

This chapter discusses the methodological approach used to design the dissertation research project and describes the research design used to collect and analyze data. The first section outlines the primary methodological assumptions that informed the approach to inquiry, including their broader epistemological groundings. The section ends with a brief explanation of why this particular methodology was most appropriate for the study. The second section focuses on development of the research design, describing methods of data collection and analysis. In addition, a description of the women who participated in the study is provided.

### METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The methodological approach I have used to develop the research design for this dissertation research project is grounded in feminist standpoint epistemology. Feminist standpoint epistemology was developed by feminist philosophers and further elaborated by feminist methodologists to challenge the foundational premises of Descartes—and, therefore, of the entire edifice of Western masculinist thought—by postulating that the separation of mind from body, of consciousness from experience, of fact from value is a human impossibility, an intellectual and political myth. They have done so on two grounds.

First, Feminist thought, itself inherently political, recognizes that all systems of thought are politicized because all thinkers, all knowers are necessarily situated in history—there is, in *reality*, no possibility of splitting one's self off from anything, least of all the material and psychic realities of one's own existence; there is no Archimedean standpoint to *where* one can escape to achieve a value neutral objectivity, much less *pure reason*. Donna Haraway (2004) has summed up the logic of the feminist critique thus: "Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*" (p. 86; emphasis in original). Second, the context of discovery is a crucial aspect of inquiry because it is inextricably linked to social life—we also live the worlds and lives we research. Therefore, rather than separate the scientist (or

observer) from the objects of her investigation, standpoint methodologists argue that observation should *begin from the social realities of those who are investigated*. Moreover, if one must see from somewhere, if all knowledge is situated, then the relationship of subjects of knowledge to the objects of their investigation must also be interrogated as part of the context of discovery. As Harding (1993) has argued, "the fact that subjects of knowledge are embodied and socially located has the consequence that they are not fundamentally different from objects of knowledge . . . ; the same kinds of social forces that shape objects of knowledge also shape (but do not determine) knowers and their scientific projects" (p. 64). The interrogation of the relationship between knowledge (what is known or discovered) and power (who can know it and how) is the central preoccupation of feminist standpoint epistemology.

Harding's argument is that at precisely the point where masculinist science has been severely disadvantaged by the fallacies of Cartesian epistemology, feminist standpoint epistemology allows for the achievement of a much stronger objectivity by requiring that "the subject of knowledge be placed on the same critical, causal plane as the objects of knowledge" (p. 69). Feminist standpoint epistemologists hold that by placing women (and/or other oppressed groups) on this same critical, causal plane, they become subjects of knowledge as well as objects of knowledge/investigation. Hence, the split between subject/object, subjectivity/objectivity is circumvented, enhancing explanatory power. In this view, through the paranoid quest to subordinate and control, masculinist science has severely limited *both who can be a knower and, therefore, who and what can be known*. Standpoint epistemologists argue, on the other hand, that by beginning with the knowledges of the oppressed, one can provide a fuller and more accurate account of the material and social relations of power and knowledge, oppression and domination, resistance and struggle.

Feminist standpoint epistemology is therefore inherently political—women’s recognition of their oppression *as women* (i.e., because they are women) is its *sine qua non*. This precondition has been established through intellectual and political struggle that has had both individual and collective dimensions. Smith (1977) has written about this struggle thus: “For we discover oppression in learning to speak of it as such, not as something which is peculiar to yourself, not as something which is an inner weakness, nor as estrangement from yourself, but as something which is indeed imposed upon you by the society and which is experienced in common with others” (p. 11). And Hartsock (1983) has described women’s efforts to draw “connections between their personal experiences and political generalities about the oppression of women.” She writes: “We came to understand our experience, our past, in a way that transformed both our experience and ourselves” (p. 59). Finally, Collins (1990) has argued (and black feminist literature and scholarship now documents) that women of color have always been involved in precisely this form of intellectual and political struggle as a condition of their very survival.

Hence, feminist standpoint epistemology promotes a theory of the subject as the product of intellectual and political struggle. It takes women as knowing subjects, meaning as those who have a capacity *to know*. This is a theory of the subject as inherently social yet divided against itself (e.g., Smith's "bifurcated consciousness" (1987:6-9), Hartsock's "feminist standpoint/abstract masculinity" (1998:117-119), and Collins's "outsider within status" (2000:11-13)). Paradoxically, it is this internal contradiction that both compels interrogation and creates the conditions of possibility for developing critical practice. For feminist standpoint epistemology, knowledge is the historical product of the intellectual and political struggle to develop and maintain this critical practice—an oppositional politics (i.e., a standpoint): “A standpoint is a technical theoretical device that can allow for the creation of better (more objective, more liberatory) accounts of the world . . . , the theoretical conditions of possibility for creating alternatives” (Hartsock 1998a:236). Crucial to these

assumptions is the methodological proposition that to grasp the full extent of the implications of women's standpoint, one must begin inquiry in the material realities of women's everyday experience *and move from there to examine how that experience is organized from outside itself by broader social processes and institutional arrangements.*

In other words, this methodology argues for interrogating oppression *as a complex of social relations and processes that lie outside the individual, yet express themselves through her*, and, therefore, can only be understood *in relationship to the organization of society as a whole*. Hartsock (1998b) has explained the implications of this methodology thus:

Because Marx focused not on objects as such but on the relations between them, he could *understand reality as a social process and look at the processes defining individuals, rather than at the properties or attributes of the individuals themselves*. Since each phenomenon changes form constantly, as the relations of which it is composed take on different meanings and forms, the possibility of understanding processes as they change depends on one's grasp of their role in the social whole. (P. 92; emphasis mine)

Following these assumptions, feminist standpoint methodologists have been able to explore the production of knowledge as an active, collective (i.e., socially constructed) coordination of processes that are *necessarily* grounded in material relations—in experience, (otherwise, we would not be able to discern them). Therefore, this methodology makes obsolete the need to separate subjects of knowledge from objects of knowledge, since through this critical practice *they become one and the same*. However, this is not to argue that feminist standpoint methodologists are privileging any one individual or collective *women's perspective or point of view*. Rather, it is to argue that women's experience, including their perspectives or points of view, are the products of social processes that lie outside their immediate experience. As Hartsock suggests above, it is not the particular "properties or attributes" of individuals that are the most useful categories of analysis for interrogating oppression, but the social relations and social processes that shape them.

I used feminist standpoint methodology to inform the research design for this study because I determined it was the best approach for answering my research questions. When studied at all, women's educational aspirations and expectations are most often addressed as individual traits, attributes, and/or characteristics that are stable and fixed because they are expressed (i.e., articulated) by individuals in these ways. However, my research questions were aimed at explaining the social processes through which women cultivated educational aspirations and expectations in the first place; therefore, I needed a methodology that would allow me to begin inquiry at the point of this articulation and then trace that articulation back through women's own accounts of their educational life histories.

In other words, I needed to both describe *and explain* the social processes that engendered and then shaped the women's educational aspirations and expectations *and* do so *through* a contextualized account of their educational experiences. In addition, because the work is primarily interpretive, I needed a methodological approach that would allow me to establish categories of analysis that I found most relevant and useful as the analysis evolved. For example, although I knew that educational aspirations and expectations were relevant dependent variables, as established by my research questions, I did not know what the relevant independent variables would be because these variables needed to evolve from the analysis of data—from women's own accounts of their educational life histories.

Second, because feminist standpoint methodology is always political, it was a good approach for potentially investigating the implications of gender, age, race/ethnicity and social class as both aspects of identity and as interconnected forms of both social organization and social subordination within systems of stratification—which is my way of understanding them, and the way I was trained to understand them as a feminist sociologist. Finally, feminist standpoint methodology required me to consider my own position as a researcher in relationship to both my primary informants and to the women who participated in the study in order to develop an awareness of the power relations that

existed among us, and to consider how these power relations influenced my approach to inquiry, my execution of the study, and my research findings—all of which, I argue, contribute to the study's validity and objectivity.

Specifically, my access to women students in adult education and literacy programs came through professional relationships I established with administrators and teachers in adult education and literacy programs who were, at the same time, colleagues and friends. At one of the programs, I was employed as an adult basic education and literacy teacher, and at the other program, I established a close personal friendship with the teacher who was my principal informant. Particularly in the case of the program for which I worked, the power relations inherent in these arrangements were often complex and contradictory. For example, routinely toward the end of the winter/spring cycles, the program's payroll became two to three month's delinquent before staff were laid off for the last two months of the summer in July and August. Although the payroll was caught up the following fall, it sometimes took as long as another month and a half for this to be accomplished, which created extreme financial hardship for me and my co-workers. However, because I had invested time and effort in developing this relationship and in negotiating permission to collect data for my dissertation research from this program site, I felt that I could not resign. In other words, my role as a paid teacher and my role as a researcher conflicted in ways that were difficult and challenging for me to negotiate.

In addition, my friendship with the teacher who was my principal informant at the second program site was initiated through our professional relationship as both teachers and colleagues in the field of adult education and literacy and by my search for an appropriate adult education and literacy program to serve as a second institutional source for collecting data for my dissertation research project. Although the power relations were not as complex, the degree to which I had to rely on my friend/colleague to help me with gaining access to both administrators and students sometimes made me uncomfortable

because of the time and effort she was so willing to contribute to the effort. In other words, although my research effort received a good deal of support from both program sites and principal informants were consistently cooperative, I sometimes worried whether I might be taking advantage of their generosity.

Another area of concern was my relationship with students that I taught at the program site where I held a paid position and for the women students who participated in the study more generally. However, none of the students I was teaching were recruited for the study which circumvented any immediate conflict of interest this might introduce. Still, those women who participated in the study from the program site where I taught knew me personally, and a few of these women had been former students that I had advised and promoted. Therefore, I had to be self-conscious about what this might mean for those women who participated. In other words, because being a teacher put me in a position of authority over students in this particular context, I had to give special attention to the informed consent process to make sure that students at the program site where I taught did not feel any coercion to volunteer when asked to do so by the Director of the program because of my position as a teacher.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This section describes the research design and methods used for the study. Sources of data are identified, and a description of the data collection sites is provided. In addition, methods of data collection, procedures used to recruit participants, and methods of data analysis are described. The section includes a comprehensive demographic description of the women who participated in the study.

### Sources of Data

Following the methodological assumptions outlined above, the data collected and analyzed for this dissertation research project consist of accounts of the educational life histories of twenty women who were currently enrolled in, or had graduated from, adult education and literacy programs. That is, inquiry began in educationally disadvantaged women's own accounts of their experiences with education over the course of their non-traditional educational trajectories.

### Description of Adult Education and Literacy Program Sites

Each of the women who participated in the study was recruited from one of two adult education and literacy programs in Boston, Massachusetts: Central Alternative School (CAS) and Northside Family Learning Program (NFLP). Both of these programs have established strong track records for both graduating women students and for transitioning them to college.

Central Alternative School (CAS) was established in 1979 as a non-sectarian, non-profit, community-based organization by community residents and a group of religious educators who have been working in Boston for over 120 years. CAS defines its organizational mission as one of "community service, adult literacy, and educational and economic empowerment in an embattled but resourceful . . . neighborhood desperately in need of educational opportunities for adult residents." The organization's stated purpose is "to bring people from different cultures and races together harmoniously in a way that

empowers them with the education, skills, and support they need to improve the conditions of their lives and the conditions in their neighborhoods." This program is primarily funded through the Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education, which supports adult educational services in the state through its Adult Community and Learning Services division.

Functioning primarily as an adult education and literacy program since the early 1980s, CAS provides educational services to about 135 students, most of whom are Cape Verdean or African American, and two-thirds of whom are women. Operated as an alternative school for adults, this program offers twenty hours of weekly instruction (9:00AM to 1:00PM, Monday through Friday) in small classes of about 8 to 12 students at three academic levels: adult literacy (English proficiency and literacy), adult basic education (i.e., elementary-level), and adult secondary education (i.e., high school-level). In addition, CAS offers instruction in career awareness, financial literacy, and computer literacy and supports an active Student Advisory Council. Students are called "participants," and the program uses a "participatory approach" that actively involves students in most decision-making processes, including curriculum development, hiring of staff, etc. CAS also administers a college transition program, partnering with a community college in the neighborhood and maintains a collaboration with another community college in the Boston area. Students who successfully complete the secondary-level program earn an accredited "Adult High School Diploma." To be awarded this diploma, students must also pass the required Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exams. CAS staff consist of nine members: one executive director, two full-time teachers, three part-time teachers, one part-time counselor, one full-time college transition coordinator, and one part-time administrative assistant.

Northside Family Learning Program (NFLP) is a community-based organization that offers a comprehensive, holistic approach to family learning services for low-income

mothers. This program was established in 1974 by a group of religious educators in response to their experiences working with large numbers of mostly female-headed, low-income families who were struggling with the pervasive effects of poverty in one of Boston's neighborhoods. NFLP is the result of the 1980 merger of an organization that served low-income preschool children and their parents living in the neighborhood and an adult education and literacy program that targeted low-income single mothers in the same area. NFLP's stated mission is based on a commitment "to the development of strong, stable, healthy family functioning. [This program is aimed at] breaking the cycle of poverty among low-income families by providing services that enable poor, at-risk mothers and their children to transform their lives and become healthy, responsible, successful, and economically self-sufficient members of their communities."

NFLP provides adult education and literacy services four full days a week (Monday through Thursday) to about 50 mothers, most of whom are involved in adult basic education (elementary-level) classes or studying for the General Education Diploma (GED), which requires passing exams in five subject areas: reading, writing, math, social studies, and science. NFLP is comprehensive, including parenting classes, health and wellness classes, home management classes, and help with peer relationships including involvement in support groups and intensive professional counseling. Classes are also offered in job readiness training and life skills education. In addition, the program supports an adult and child educational tutoring program that is staffed through volunteers and an academic tutoring program for alumni who are attending college.

As a family-focused education program, NFLP also provides a comprehensive learning program for the children of their adult students/mothers, including both toddler and pre-school programs (i.e., a Montessori program), maintains a licensed Infant Development Center, and provides summer programming to meet the needs of their mothers' school-aged children. NFLP staff consist of 22 members, most of whom are full-time employees:

three executive directors and one administrative assistant, two program development specialists, four adult education teachers, and two advocates/counselors. Six members of the staff teach in the Montessori or toddler programs, which include two AmeriCorps volunteers; two staff members, including one full-time teacher, manage the infant learning program.

#### Methods of Data Collection: Educational Life Histories

Educational life histories are accounts of an individual's educational experiences over their life course. Accounts of the educational life histories of the twenty women who participated in the study were collected by conducting intensive, semi-structured, open-ended interviews, which were digitally recorded. The interviews were conducted April through June of 2010. Each interview was conducted at the student's adult education and literacy program site. The length of the interviews ranged from 2 hours and 20 minutes to a little over 5 hours; the average interview length was about 2 hours and 45 minutes. An interview schedule (Appendix A) was used to guide each interview. This interview schedule was designed to record each woman's account of her experiences with education, including her experiences in elementary school and high school; her experiences in adult education and literacy programs, including her experiences in her current program (or the program from which she graduated). In addition, each woman was asked to describe her goals for the future. At the conclusion of each of the recorded interviews, each woman completed a brief "Educational Life history Questionnaire" (Appendix B) designed to collect basic demographic information (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, religion, marital status, employment and occupation, household income, educational attainment, and schools attended). After completing the brief questionnaire, each woman whose educational life history was recorded was paid \$25.00 for participating in the study.

There are a number of reasons why these women's educational life histories were appropriate data for answering my research questions. First, both of the adult education and

literacy programs, because of the nature of their mission and the type of educational services they provide, enrolled women students who were educationally disadvantaged, their experiences with education culminating in non-traditional educational trajectories—my broad research interest. Moreover, since each of the women had enrolled in and attended one of the two adult education and literacy programs, there was a clear indication that these women had cultivated educational aspirations at some level because they were acting upon them. Therefore, accounts of the educational life histories of women who were attending or had graduated from adult education and literacy programs provided a unique opportunity for investigating the educational aspirations and expectations of women who had followed non-traditional educational trajectories.

Finally, given my research questions and methodological approach to inquiry, because each of these adult education and literacy programs enrolled both native and immigrant women students across a wide range of ages and from a variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds, these women's educational life histories offered particularly relevant data for the investigation because my broader purpose was to explain the social processes that shaped the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations, persistence in adult education and literacy programs, and transition to college in common ways among women who had very different educational backgrounds and experiences. As Smith (1987) has argued "the explication of institutional relations brings to light not only common bases of experience but also bases of experience *that are not in common* [i.e. "differences"] *but are grounded in the same set of social relations*" pg. 176 [emphasis mine]. In other words, extremely uncommon bases of women's educational experience can be organized through quite common bases of social organization and women's subordination. Educationally disadvantaged women's accounts of their educational life histories made it possible to "discover" both bases of educational experience that were common among the women who participated in the study and those bases of experience that were uncommon.

### Recruitment of Participants

An availability sampling method was used to select participants. I negotiated a broad range of access to women students through the executive administrators of each of the adult education and literacy programs. In fall 2006, I began volunteering at Central Alternative School (CAS) for the purpose of exploring the possibilities of using data from adult education and literacy programs to answer research questions about women's non-traditional educational trajectories—the broad research interest with which I first began to conceptualize the dissertation research project. This volunteer experience was a positive one. Over the two years of my volunteer service, I developed a productive working relationship with CAS's executive director who eventually offered me a part-time, paid position beginning fall 2008. Through this relationship, I was granted permission to invite women students to participate in the study and to conduct the interviews at the program site. In terms of access to Northside Family Learning Program (NFLP), in January and February 2009, I participated in a series of professional development workshops at the Adult Learning Resource Institute at University of Massachusetts, Boston, which were conducted by one of NFLP's full-time teachers. I developed a relationship with this teacher who invited me to visit the program and tour the facility. During this visit, I was introduced to one of their executive directors who, after listening to a description of my research interests and objectives, also granted me permission to invite women students from the program to participate in the study and granted me permission to conduct the interviews on the program site.

Although both adult education and literacy programs offered instruction to women at several academic levels, only women students who were reading English at no lower than a 9th grade level were recruited as participants for the study. This was to insure that participants would be able to read and understand the informed consent documents. In addition, although selecting an availability sample, an effort was made to include a range of

ages, race/ethnicities, immigrant statuses, and program tenures among women students who were identified by principal informants as attending relatively regularly and doing reasonably well in their programs, academically and socially—the inclusion criteria for selection. Participation was limited to women who were attending regularly because rates of attrition in adult education and literacy programs are extremely high, and I wanted to increase the potential for interviewing at least some women who would eventually go on to complete their adult education and literacy programs.

Potential participants from CAS were identified by the program's executive director (and my principal informant), who used knowledge of the demographics of the student population and student records to determine which women students met the inclusion criteria. Once it was established that a woman met the inclusion criteria, this director made individual contact with each of the women students in person at the program site and invited them to participate in the study. The director explained to each woman that I was interviewing women students about their educational experiences to collect data for my dissertation research project and would like to include them as a participant in my study. If the student expressed interest, I then followed up by making personal contact with her at the program site. Women who had graduated from the program were contacted by the director, and if the woman expressed interest, I followed up his contact.

I explained to each of these potential participants that I was conducting digitally recorded interviews that focused on the educational life histories of women students for the purpose of collecting data for my dissertation research project and provided a brief description of the goals of the research. I also briefly outlined the study procedures in terms of probable length of interviews and remuneration offered. Finally, I answered any initial questions, and, if the potential participant chose to volunteer, I scheduled the interview.

In a similar manner, again relying on knowledge of the demographics of the student population and student records, potential participants from NFLP who met the inclusion

criteria were identified by the program's executive director, and the teacher who introduced me to the program (my principal informant). I then made contact with this small group of women students in a meeting at the program site and invited them to participate in the study, following the protocol outlined above (i.e., briefly explaining the study's purposes, goals, and parameters, remuneration, and answering any initial questions). Those women who were interested in volunteering wrote their names and telephone numbers on a list, and I then contacted each woman and scheduled an interview. Women who had graduated from the program were contacted by my principal informant, and I then followed up, scheduling interviews with those women who volunteered to participate.

#### Description of Participants

*Demographic overview.* Of the twenty women who participated in the study, six were Haitian (1) or Cape Verdean (5), five were African American, six were Latina, and three were Irish American. Thirteen of the women—all six Haitian/Cape Verdean women, all five African American women, and two Latinas—were from Central Alternative School (CAS). The other seven women—four of the Latinas and all three of the Irish American women—were from Northside Family Learning Program (NFLP). Most of the women (17) were of working-class origin, and three were of middle-class origin: one Haitian, one Cape Verdean, and one African American. The Haitian/Cape Verdean and African American women were considerably older than the Latinas or Irish American women. Age ranges by racial/ethnic group follow: Haitian and Cape Verdean: 26 – 60 years; African American: 42 – 61 years; Latina: 20 – 39 years; Irish American: 22 – 38 years. Seven of the twenty women—all of the Haitian/Cape Verdean women and one of the Latinas (a Nicaraguan) were immigrants with a median time in the United States of fifteen years.

Eight of the twenty women were employed, including all of the Haitian and Cape Verdean women, and twelve of the women were unemployed, including all of the Latinas. Most of the women were low-income, reporting annual incomes of under \$15,000; only one

woman reported an annual income over \$40,000. Seven of the women were married, and thirteen were single: One was a widow, and two were divorced; ten women had never been married (See Chapter 6, Table 6.1: Marital Status by Race/Ethnicity). Seven women reported male violence and abuse in their educational life histories. Four women had just completed drug abuse treatment programs and were in recovery. Nineteen of the women who participated in the study were mothers, and five were grandmothers. Twelve of the women had school-aged children, and two had pre-school aged children. Three of the women had grandchildren living in their households. All of the women who indicated a religious affiliation were Christian; most were Catholics, and several were Baptists.

*Prior educational attainment.* Table 2.1 shows the prior educational attainment of the women by racial/ethnic group. Prior educational attainment is defined as the level of

Table 2.1—Prior Educational Attainment by Race/Ethnicity

Prior Educational Attainment	Race/Ethnicity				Totals	%
	Cape Verdean Haitian	African American	Latina	Irish American		
< High School	2	4	6	1	13	65
High School/GED	1			2	3	15
Some College		1			1	5
Bachelors	2				2	10
Masters	1				1	5
Totals	6	5	6	3	20	100

education achieved prior to entering one of the two adult education and literacy programs. As the table shows, thirteen of the twenty women who participated in the study had dropped out of high school (See Chapter 4, Table 4.1: Reasons for Dropping Out of School by Race/Ethnicity), and seven had earned at least a high school diploma before entering their adult education and literacy programs. The women who had earned a high school diploma generally entered their adult education and literacy programs to strengthen their

academic skills or to improve their English. Both of the Irish American women who had already earned a high school diploma initially entered their programs to prepare for the basic skills examinations frequently required by prospective employers. The African American woman who had completed some college wanted to strengthen her academic skills so that she could return and complete her bachelor's degree. The Haitian and Cape Verdean women who had earned high school diplomas or college degrees in their native countries wanted to earn U.S. high school diplomas, improve their English, and go on to earn college degrees in the United States.

*Women who transitioned to college.* Although twelve of the twenty women who participated in the study were attending their adult education and literacy programs regularly at the time their educational life histories were recorded, the other eight women had successfully completed their adult education and literacy programs and transitioned to college. Four of these eight women had dropped out of high school and subsequently earned the adult high school diploma or GED that qualified them for college admission from their adult education and literacy programs. The other four women had already earned at least a high school diploma before entering their adult education and literacy programs. Of the eight women who transitioned to college, three had just completed their adult education and literacy programs and were scheduled to begin college the following fall, three had been enrolled in college for about two years, one had completed a bachelor's degree the year before, and another had completed two years toward a bachelor's degree, but was forced to drop out because of health reasons.

#### Methods of Data Analysis

The digital recordings of the intensive interviews were transcribed by me. Before transcription began, I listened to each woman's complete account of her educational life history once. Next, I went back and listened to each woman's complete account again and digitally tagged points in the conversations that seemed relevant for answering my research

questions. After listening to each account twice, and tagging relevant points, I transcribed each interview—verbatim and in its entirety. I then began analysis of the accounts through a recursive process of listening to the recorded interviews and also reading the transcripts to get an initial sense of the most salient topics. Once I identified these topics, I began coding the transcripts manually using sticky notes. I then searched for discernable patterns among these topics to identify themes using my word processors "search and find" feature. Finally, I developed a color-coded system for using sticky notes to trace and mark the common themes throughout the transcripts.

Grounded in the feminist methodological assumptions outlined above, rather than attempt to achieve "objectivity" by distancing myself from my data (i.e., the women's accounts of their educational life histories), I submerged myself in these accounts. In other words, my analysis of the women's educational life histories has taken seriously the feminist methodological proposition that we can produce more accurate descriptions and objective interpretations of women's experience when we recognize that these experiences are often indiscernible within dominant interpretive frames because these frames have been shaped around male prerogatives and concerns. As DeVault (1999) has argued, "when this kind of topic construction is successful, we recognize the thinking that emerges from the analysis—we know the experience—but we are also surprised and learn something new" (p. 65).

My primary objective for data analysis was aimed at "learning something new" by beginning analysis in the women's own accounts of their educational life histories. However, from here (i.e., after the topics were constructed), I moved outside the women's experience to investigate how the cultivation of their educational aspirations and expectations had been shaped by broader social processes and institutional arrangements to establish categories of analysis. I focused this broader analysis on the ways that gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination organized the women's experiences, punctuating their educational life histories, and explicated the ways that social processes of the transmission of

educational values and the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations created spaces for resistance and opportunities for struggling to achieve a standpoint.

### **CHAPTER 3: Family as a Transmitter of Educational Values**

Based on analysis of the educational life histories of the women who participated in the study, the two primary institutional sources of the transmission of their educational values were: 1) family and 2) work. Because the family is the first and most basic social institution to which we are introduced and of which we develop intimate knowledge, it is through their families of origin that individuals first learn about education and schooling. Although the influences of family and work often intersect as educational trajectories evolve over the life course, this chapter is focused specifically on identifying and analyzing social processes of the transmission of educational values from parents to adolescents through family socialization processes. The first section of the chapter describes the educational aspirations and expectations articulated by the women who participated in the study, providing a demographic and educational profile of the group. The second section identifies the family members who were most influential for transmitting educational values to the women who participated in the study—their mothers and grandmothers—and describes these values, explaining how they were transmitted to daughters and granddaughters through family socialization processes. This section also identifies how social processes of the transmission of educational values created potential spaces for the resistance of gender, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination.

The following section describes the educational aspirations and expectations of the women who participated in the study.

#### **EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS**

The educational aspirations of the women who participated in the study were quite high, all but one woman aspiring to post-secondary education at some level. In other words, nineteen of the twenty women (or 95 percent of them) expressed a desire to attend college. Moreover, when discussing their reasons for aspiring to post-secondary education and

explaining why they expected to succeed, educational aspirations were often linked to specific occupational and/or professional goals, albeit, sometimes rather vaguely.

Educational aspirations and expectations were congruent: All of the women projected a very high level of self-confidence in their potential to fulfill their educational aspirations, as well as the occupational and/or professional goals they linked to them, *at the level articulated*. A typical response: "Yes, I mean for me honestly, I am confident, and I think that usually when I set my mind to something, I see it materialize; I see it happening no matter how long it takes me."

In general, the higher the prior educational attainment of the woman, the higher were her educational aspirations; and the higher her educational aspirations, the more specific were her occupational or professional goals. However, this pattern did not hold with educational *expectations*. As noted above, all of the women who participated in the study held high educational expectations. In other words, these women expressed a high probability of reaching their educational goals regardless of their level of prior educational attainment, of how high or low their educational aspirations, or how specific or vague their occupational and/or professional goals.

#### Prior Educational Attainment, Race/Ethnicity, and Age

Educational aspirations for college ranged from the more general, "taking some college courses," to the more specific, "I would go for the Ph.D." As Table 3.1 below shows, six of the study participants aspired to graduate-level education, and five of these women were over the age of forty. Three women—one African American woman and two Cape Verdean women—clearly indicated the Ph.D. as their educational aspiration, and three more of these women—one Haitian woman and two African American women—clearly indicated the master's degree as an educational aspiration. Two of these women, both African Americans, had been high school dropouts. On the other hand, the other four women reported the highest levels of prior educational attainment of any of the women in the

Table 3.1—Educational Aspirations by Race/Ethnicity and Age

Educational Aspirations	Race/Ethnicity								Total
	Cape Verdean Haitian		African American		Latina		Irish American		
Age Range	26 – 60		42 – 61		20 – 39		22 – 38		
Age	<40	>40	<40	>40	<40	>40	<40	>40	
High School/GED		1							1
College Courses/Certificate	1			1	4		1		7
Associates					1		1		2
Bachelors	1			1	1		1		4
Masters		1		2					3
Ph.D.	1	1		1					3
Totals	3	3		5	6		3		20

study. On average, the educational aspirations of the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women were higher than those of the Latinas or Irish American women, who were generally younger and reported lower overall levels of prior educational attainment (See Chapter 2, Table 2.1—Prior Educational Attainment by Race/Ethnicity). African American women who were high school dropouts expressed higher educational aspirations than did either the Latinas or Irish American women who were their counterparts. Furthermore, African American women articulated levels of educational aspiration that were as high as those of the Haitian and Cape Verdean women, most of whom had achieved higher levels of prior educational attainment.

In contrast to the six women above who aspired to graduate-level education, seven women in the study, although they aspired to post-secondary education at some level, were more ambiguous about their educational aspirations, aspiring to "taking some college courses" or "earning a college certificate in something." Although relatively high levels of

prior educational attainment were reported by the women who aspired to graduate-level education, not one of these seven women had yet achieved her high school diploma or GED. In addition, these seven women, four of whom were Latinas under 40 years old, identified their occupational goals only vaguely in the process of discussing their broader occupational interests more generally. As noted above, women with higher levels of prior educational attainment generally expressed higher educational aspirations and described more specific occupational and/or professional goals.

The responses of one of these seven women, a 20 year old Latina (i.e., Puerto Rican), the youngest woman in the study, are typically ambiguous about the links between earning a college certificate and rather vaguely considered occupational interests:

Well, I don't know what I have to do, but I want to do something in a hotel, like to work at the front desk of a hotel, but I don't know exactly where. . . . After [earning] my GED, I would like to do something that will help me with my career: go into another program, get some type of certificate in whatever I have to get it in to do what I want to do.

Although some women in this group were less vague about their occupational interests, their articulation of their educational aspirations was much more ambiguous than that of the women who aspired to higher levels of post-secondary education. Yet, the educational *expectations* of this group were as high as those of the other women. Although the 20 year old Latina discussed above was ambiguous about her educational aspirations and vague about her occupational goals, *she projected a very high level of self-confidence in her potential to achieve both:*

Oh, well I know I can do what I want to do [with laughter]!!! I've always been very determined. And I can, although I haven't done as much schooling as I should, and I'm kind of shy, I know how to speak my way into things. And now I'm not saying I'm the smartest person in the world, but I can get along with life and get along in the world.

High levels of self-confidence in their potential to reach their educational goals (i.e., high educational expectations) was the norm among all of the women who participated in the study, regardless of their level of prior educational attainment, race/ethnicity, or age.

Notwithstanding their limited knowledge of educational and occupational opportunity structures, these women were convinced they could succeed.

Socio-cultural beliefs or assumptions about the age-appropriateness of education, particularly higher education, did not influence the educational aspirations or expectations of the older women who participated in the study. Although health issues were noted as potential barriers, none of the older women in the study were concerned about age *per se* in the sense of thinking that they might be "too old" to pursue a college education or that their educational aspirations as articulated might be unrealistic given their age. The oldest women in the study—two women in their late-fifties and two in their early-sixties—did acknowledge considerations of age and health in their articulations of their educational aspirations; whereas, none of the younger women did so. However, notwithstanding health considerations, the older women in the study were as confident in their potential to reach their educational goals as were the younger women. Moreover, the level of educational aspirations articulated by the older women were generally higher than those of the younger women, rather than lower.

For example, a 60 year old Cape Verdean woman, who had attained associate's and bachelor's degrees after graduating from her adult education and literacy program, explained that she was now in the process of looking for a master's program and would go on for the Ph.D. (with laughter): "if God gives me the right to be alive." A 61 year old African American woman—the oldest woman in the study—had completed 2 1/2 years toward a bachelor's degree in education, which she discontinued several years earlier because of complications with diabetes. When asked what level of education she hoped to ultimately achieve, she answered:

Well, when I was younger, when I first started, I said that I wanted to get my bachelor's and then I was going to try to get my master's. And if I was younger, and I didn't have all of these kids, I would go on for the Ph.D. And as old as I am now, and even with my health problems, I still want it—I still hope to go back and

continue. My kids are all raised now, and I still want my Ph.D. Because at this point, it's not about work and kids anymore, it's about me. I want it for me.

A 59 year old African American woman with chronic respiratory problems was confident that she could achieve a college degree: "I know I could if I set my mind to it. Yea, if only my health would hold up, I could." And another African American woman, 58 years old, who aspired to a master's degree in social work, stated adamantly that she was "expecting to go all the way." She added with enthusiasm: "And I'm not going to let age stop me!"

#### Reasons Given for Educational Aspirations and Occupational Goals

*Achieving social status/identity.* Although these women linked their educational aspirations to occupational and/or professional goals, the reasons given by the women for both their educational aspirations *and* their occupational/professional goals were directly related to the value they placed on achieving the social status that accrues to those who have attained a college education and work in an occupation or profession that requires one. In other words, one of the primary reasons these women aspired to post-secondary education was grounded in their perception that a college degree (or certificate) would provide not only the educational credentials required to qualify for an occupation or profession of interest, but would also afford the social status/identity that accrued to *both* the educational credential and the occupation/profession.

For example, when asked why she wanted to return to college to finish her bachelor's degree, one African American woman said: "I want to have those little letters behind my name. *It's for myself.*" Another African American woman whose educational aspiration was to achieve the master's in social work stated: "I can already see it. I can see my office. I can see my degree on the wall. And I can see me doing this." The notion that they were "doing education for themselves" was a theme throughout these women's accounts. As an Irish American woman who aspired to an associate's degree in culinary arts elaborated:

I could have applied for just one year and gotten a certificate in culinary arts; they offer one. But I want to do two years because I like the sound of having my associate's degree in culinary arts. I mean I want to go to college because I want to follow my dream, but I want the associate's because I want to have a college degree.

This woman's dream was to own and operate her own restaurant; therefore, she wanted the training in culinary arts to help her develop her skills as a chef and as a manager. Although she could accomplish this with the certificate, she aspired to the associate's degree because the social status that accrued to the "college degree" enhanced its value for her in terms of the personal satisfaction she anticipated from achieving it. At the same time, she believed that the associate's degree would help her secure initial financing for her restaurant because as she said, investors will see "that I know what I'm doing, that I'm serious."

Social status/identity considerations were often closely related to both the degree of personal satisfaction women associated with the educational achievement and to what women believed the educational credential would do for them in terms of the perceptions of others, particularly those in positions of power and authority. For example, as is clear from the woman's account above, social status/identity considerations could also be directly related to economic concerns: This woman believed that the social status that accrued to her associate's degree would help her qualify for a loan by signaling that she was competent in her field—a professional. Moreover, she believed that earning a college degree would signal her ability to establish and achieve a goal that was important to her. Finally, her perception that the educational credential could be used to convey these positive traits to others increased the value of the credential even more in terms of the self-satisfaction she anticipated from the achievement.

Indeed, when asked why they wanted to attain a college degree or work in an occupation or profession that required one, not one woman mentioned economic returns (e.g., anticipated levels of earned income or potential salary expectations). Although these women understood that they needed to work to earn a living, they assumed that once

employed in an occupation or profession that required a college degree, they would earn an adequate living income as a condition of having met these requirements (i.e., attaining the degree and securing the position). For the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study, achieving social status/identity through educational attainment was as important, and for some women, more important, than increasing their potential to earn an adequate income. This finding supports the conclusions of other researchers in adult education and literacy who have interpreted educationally disadvantaged women's participation in adult education and literacy programs as a "struggle to become somebody" (Luttrell 1997:3; Horsman 1990:94; Rockhill 1990:104-105). Luttrell (1997) has argued that "adult education is about establishing a credible, worthy self and public identity as much as it is about gaining a diploma" (p. 126). The "struggle to become somebody" for the women who participated in this study meant working toward obtaining educational credentials that would enhance both their social and economic status. These were also practical ways that these women resisted the consequences of educational disadvantage, the result of their gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination.

Finally, several women understood the social status that their educational attainment would afford them as a way of providing a positive role model for their children and/or grandchildren. As a 61 year old one Cape Verdean woman explained: "I want to be an example for my grandchildren. So one day they can be told by my daughters that even their own grandmother went back to school and excelled." Other researchers in adult educational and literacy have also found the provision of a positive role model for children to be a powerful incentive for the cultivation of educationally disadvantaged women's educational aspirations (Christopher 2005; Haleman 2004; Rivera 2008). But providing a role model for children and grandchildren also fulfills another important purpose: It conveys the importance of education, as well as the notion that people have a right to education, to a next generation. As a result, it becomes more likely that this next generation will use

education as a means for developing precisely the critical thinking skills necessary for interrogating gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination. In other words, these women were creating the conditions of possibility for using education as a vehicle for engaging in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

*Fulfilling commitments to religious/political values and beliefs.* In addition to social status/identity considerations, many women integrated their educational aspirations and occupational/professional goals with an expression of their religious and/or political values and beliefs. The desire to help others was a primary motivator identified by these women. For the educationally disadvantaged women in this study, the potential for fulfilling these commitments to religious and/or political values and beliefs through service to others and community was not only as important as achieving the educational credentials required to earn an adequate income, it was a primary contingency for doing so. Although the women articulated their educational aspirations in the context of identifying their occupational and/or professional goals, they understood these goals as a means to a greater end: that of fulfilling their commitment to helping others, being of service to their respective communities, and/or advancing the cause of social justice.

For example, when asked why she wanted to achieve her master's in the field of social work, one African American woman explained:

Because I just love helping people. And I was put here to help people, and I can see it every day. I want to be able to pick someone up. I might even save some soul. This is my calling. And I don't tell everybody, but I'm in training for the ministry too, and the ministry revolves around social work.

When asked where she was headed, her goals for the next several years, another African American woman said: "I want to start a ministry with the women, for them to have somewhere to go. You know I came back [to school] for a purpose. I came back here to work for the Lord." An Irish American woman whose occupational goal was to become a substance abuse caseworker said she hoped to find a certificate program in the field

because she loved her job as a direct care provider in a drug treatment program. However, she added expressing disappointment: "I don't feel like I'm doing enough. I would love to be a case manager. Nine times out of ten I sit in the TV room now, and try to help clients find options. It's not my job, but I want to help so much." And an African American woman who was planning to enter a bachelor's degree program the following fall explained:

Things are in the planning stages, not in stone. But I definitely want to work with people, and I enjoy it. And I feel that everyone needs some help at some point in their journey. And if I can use my education, my expertise, my experience, and my kindness, I want to do that—to help.

Finally, a Latina (i.e., Nicaraguan) whose parents had been Sandinistas, integrated her educational aspirations with her political values and beliefs and her desire to be of service to her community:

Well, I am finishing my schooling here this term, my high school diploma. And then I would like to take college courses. Something like human services. I love to work with people. I am very strong in the social. Something like I was doing before in Nicaragua—social justice work in the community. I like this; it's very important.

The reasons this woman gives for her educational aspirations and expectations (i.e., doing "social justice work in the community) are grounded in her struggle, and her family's struggle, for social justice.

*To summarize*, the educational aspirations of the women were quite high, all but one woman aspiring to post-secondary education. In addition, all of the women projected a high level of self-confidence in their potential to fulfill their educational aspirations, which were often linked to occupational and/or professional goals. In general, the higher the prior educational attainment of the woman, the higher were her educational aspirations and the more specific were her occupational/professional goals. The educational aspirations of the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women were, on average, higher than those of the Latinas or Irish American women. African American women had the highest educational aspirations, relative to their prior educational attainment, of any of the racial/ethnic groups. Although women linked their educational aspirations to occupational goals, the reasons they

gave for their educational aspirations centered on 1) achieving the social status that accrues to those who attain a college education and hold positions that require one and 2) fulfilling commitments to broader religious and/or political values and beliefs.

Although these women understood that they needed to work to earn a living, they assumed that once employed in an occupation or profession that required a college degree, they would earn an adequate living income as a condition of having met these requirements—i.e., earning the degree and successfully securing the position. Although the reasons most of the women who participated in the study gave for wanting a college degree centered on earning the educational credentials necessary to qualify them for the "helping professions" (the only professional occupations with which they had any familiarity), the intent of helping those in their families and communities who were also members of highly subordinated groups, also presented possibilities for understanding their preferences toward helping others as a political act—a form of resistance.

On the one hand, these women articulated preferences that reflect the values, beliefs, and expectations of the dominant culture. On the other hand, achieving the educational credentials that would move them in these directions also created spaces where they could potentially practice resistance—where the opportunity for achieving a standpoint would be presented as they struggled to interrogate the gender, age, racial/ethnic, and/or social class subordination of the groups with which they identify. In other words, although this study can only offer a snapshot of their educational life histories, these women are in the social process of becoming; their educational aspirations and expectations are changing them and their views of the meaning and purposes of education. As they go on to critically assess their society and their group's position within it, these women will be presented with opportunities for viewing the world in new ways.

## CONVEYING THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

This section of the chapter focuses specifically on analyzing the social processes through which educational values were transmitted to the women who participated in the study through the institution of the family. Mothers and grandmothers are identified as the most influential family members for conveying messages about the importance of education. Mothers and grandmothers did so by requiring and enforcing school attendance and by offering encouragement through explanatory frameworks that provided a rationale by placing the value of education for daughters and granddaughters within broader socio-historical and economic contexts that were specific to their race/ethnicity and social class. By framing their encouragement in this way, mothers and grandmothers grounded their explanatory frameworks in the realities of their own experience of gender, racial/ethnic, and/or social class subordination. Mothers and grandmothers had, in effect, adopted a standpoint from within which they could address the historical relevance of the systems of social stratification/subordination that had shaped both their own experiences of education, including the experience of exclusion, and their understandings of the importance education could hold for their daughters and their granddaughters.

### The Influence of Mothers and Grandmothers

Mothers and grandmothers both required and enforced school attendance and provided encouragement. Fathers and grandfathers were much less influential in this process. One of the most important social processes that transmitted educational values to the women who participated in the study was communication of the message that regular attendance in school was required and, if necessary, would be enforced. Along with requiring school attendance, the willingness and ability of mothers and grandmothers to provide the material resources necessary for school attendance were a crucial contingency that reinforced this requirement. Beyond this, it was imperative that active encouragement to attend, do well, and finish school also be received.

Sixteen of the women who participated in the study were required to attend school and actively encouraged to do so. As one Latina—her mother a single woman who herself had little formal education—commented about her mother's efforts:

School was very important to her. My mom always got up early in the morning, made sure that we had breakfast so that we could focus and have a full stomach so that we could really learn in school. She really wanted us to learn. She would say to us, "I'm trying to push you, and I'm showing you and giving you the education that I didn't have because I didn't finish school . . . "

Along with communicating the message that education was important by requiring and encouraging attendance in school, mothers and grandmothers, like the Latina mother in the excerpt above, encouraged their daughters and granddaughters to attend school by explaining why education was important to them. These mothers and grandmothers stressed the importance of finishing school to their daughters and granddaughters, identifying educational attainment as an important vehicle for improving the general quality of their family and community lives.

#### Requiring and Enforcing School Attendance

Requiring and enforcing school attendance was important because it conveyed to daughters and granddaughters that their mothers and grandmothers placed a very high value on the benefits of education for them *as women*. All of the Haitian and Cape Verdean women were immigrants who had been required to attend school in their native countries by their mothers and/or grandmothers who often went to great lengths to make access to education possible for them. For these Haitian and Cape Verdean women, four of whom were of working-class origin, the opportunity to attend school had been considered a privilege rather than a responsibility. Three of the five African American women had been required to attend school by their mothers and two were required to attend by their grandmothers, who had raised them. These mothers and grandmothers communicated the message that school was required and all sacrificed to provide what was necessary for their

daughters and granddaughters to attend—school clothes, school supplies, transportation, etc.

For most of the African American women, the requirement to attend school was enforced by restricting absences to days of illness. At the same time, daughters and granddaughters who missed school were often told that they would have to help with housework. For example, a 58 year old African American woman described how her maternal grandmother, who had raised her, enforced attendance:

And my grandmother, my grandmother, she made sure we got up every morning. The only time you could stay at home, you had to show her that you were really sick, running a temperature, throwing up, whatever. And sometimes I didn't want to go to school because I was sick, and she would test you.

She would say, "Okay then, if you stay home we will strip these beds down today!" And she meant not only wash the sheets, but she would strip the beds all the way down and take the mattresses outside, and then we had to beat those mattresses. I mean, we knew how she was. Matter of fact, [with laughter] I used to have perfect attendance at school.

Four of the six Latinas were also required to attend school by their mothers, and housework was mentioned by three as the method of enforcement. As one 39 year old Latina explained, "Oh, you had to get up for school, and if you were sick you stayed indoors, you didn't go outside. If you were sick you didn't hang out with your friends, you stayed home and you cleaned the house. She was like there was no way around it." Mothers and grandmothers who required attendance in school and enforced this requirement conveyed the message to their daughters and granddaughters that education was both valuable and necessary. They also conveyed the very gendered message that housework could be considered a punishment for not attending school.

*Women who were not required to attend school.* Four women who participated in the study were initially enrolled in elementary school and attended; however, by the time they reached middle school their parents were showing little or no interest in their schooling, did not monitor their attendance, and offered them little or no encouragement. In other words,

they were neither required nor encouraged to attend school. Of these four women, one 22 year old Irish American woman's mother had committed suicide when she was 5 years old, and her father was an abusive, low-functioning alcoholic; a 31 year old Irish American woman was raised in multiple foster homes after being removed from her mother's custody because of sexual abuse of which her stepfather was later indicted and convicted; a 28 year old Latina had lived with her father who showed no interest in her schooling; and the fourth woman, a 25 year old Latina, was actively discouraged from attending school by her mother who wanted her to provide full-time childcare for her younger siblings and work part-time to help support the family. Although these women did not receive clear and unambiguous messages about the importance of education from their families, they indicated that many of the messages they did receive about the importance of education were conveyed through their work experiences, which are discussed in Chapter 5.

#### Offering Encouragement: Explaining the Importance of Education

Requiring school attendance was reinforced by active encouragement, which mothers and grandmothers grounded within broader explanatory frameworks. These explanations were conveyed as narrative expressions that offered rationales for why education was important for daughters and granddaughters *as women*. There were important differences in how these explanatory frameworks were configured along lines of race/ethnicity. The Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American mothers and grandmothers situated the importance of education within broader socio-historical contexts that were organized through systems of gender and racial/ethnic stratification. Although the educational experiences of the Haitian and Cape Verdean women were very different from those of the African American women, the narratives used by their mothers and grandmothers to convey the importance of education to them were very similar: Both groups of women were encouraged to take advantage of educational opportunities that mothers and grandmothers, albeit for different reasons and in different socio-historical contexts, had not had. However,

although their experiences were different, the structural bases of these experiences were the same—they were organized through systems of gender and racial/ethnic subordination.

On the other hand, Latina and Irish American mothers framed their encouragement within explanatory frameworks that stressed the contemporary links between educational attainment and work opportunities, cautioning their daughters not to drop out of school. In doing so, these Latina and Irish American mothers grounded their rationales for the importance of education within broader socio-economic contexts that emphasized taking advantage of educational opportunities as a means for securing employment and earning an adequate living income. In other words, whereas the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American mothers and grandmothers focused their encouragement on reasons directly related to overcoming gender and racial/ethnic subordination, the Latina and Irish American mothers focused their encouragement on reasons related to overcoming social class subordination. However, the two were not mutually exclusive, both explanatory frameworks included elements of resistance to gender, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination that presented possibilities for engaging in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

#### The "Educational Opportunity/Family Responsibility" Narrative

One of the most pronounced themes in the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women's accounts of the messages conveyed to them by their mothers and grandmothers was a narrative expression of: *You need to go to school and get your education because I didn't have the opportunity, but you do have, and you must take advantage of it.* Along with encouragement to take advantage of educational opportunities that mothers and grandmothers had not had, these women were expected to help others in their family or community who had been less fortunate. In other words, the importance of education was conveyed to these women through an explanatory framework expressed as an "educational opportunity/family responsibility" narrative: Taking advantage of educational opportunities that mothers and grandmothers had been denied was a way of

fulfilling a woman's responsibilities not only to herself, but, even more importantly, to her family and community. It was also a way of resisting gender and racial/ethnic oppression. By framing their encouragement in this way, the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American mothers and grandmothers conveyed the expectation that education could and should be used as a political act of resistance. However, at the same time, these frameworks reinforced the dominant cultural belief in education as the great equalizer—education as panacea. Yet spaces for interrogating this belief were also created, presenting possibilities for achieving a standpoint.

*Haitian and Cape Verdean women.* This kind of active encouragement put into socio-historical perspective was particularly important for the Haitian and Cape Verdean women because their mothers' and grandmothers' opportunities to access education had been so severely limited in their native countries. A 46 year old Haitian woman of middle class origins explained that she was schooled in the city in Haiti and then went back to her town for summer vacations with a definite purpose and responsibility—to help her aunts, mother, and grandmother learn to read and write "because they never had the privilege":

Especially in Haiti, like my mother and grandmother's age, they sent the boys to school, but they didn't send the girls. My grandfather was a very smart man who knew how to read and write very well, and several of my uncles did too, but my mother and grandmother could not.

I remember one day my grandmother sat and calculated the cost of one year, the cost of money she spent on one year for one child for school, and she had nine children. Some of them did have the privilege to be educated—the boys. She sent the boys to school but not the girls.

Most of the Cape Verdean women gave similar accounts of mothers or grandmothers who had told them they'd had no, or very limited, opportunities for formal education *because they were women*. These mothers and grandmothers conveyed their encouragement to their daughters and granddaughters through these explanatory frameworks. As one 55 year old Cape Verdean woman revealed:

In my time, it was hard, especially for women. Like my mother used to say to me, she didn't know how to read because a long, long time ago, they said a woman was not supposed to go to school. Even today, many women from my country don't even know how to write their names.

And my mother said she didn't want that to happen to me and my sisters. Even though my mother didn't go to school, she knew that school was important for us. She said that "The school is your future. When you have education you have everything."

One of the younger Cape Verdean women, a 30 year old, was told by her mother that "the school is your husband." This woman's account described a mother who had encouraged education as a means to prepare for work and work as a means for achieving a degree of independence: "My mother would always say to me: 'Study and be a doctor, study and be something more than me because I didn't have an opportunity. Study and be something for you.'" By conveying these messages in this way, both mothers and grandmothers provided a crucial socio-historical context for explaining why their daughters and granddaughters should value education *as women*—a space for resistance. At the same time, these mothers and grandmothers were involved in the social and political process of adopting a standpoint, one centered in these Cape Verdean women's experience of gender oppression.

*The Cape Verdean socio-historical context.* For the Cape Verdean women who participated in the study, the narrative of "educational opportunity/family responsibility" linked transmission of the value of education to a history of gender subordination and inequality in Cape Verde. These women's accounts of the explanatory frameworks used by their mothers to convey the importance of education to them revealed a history of gender exclusion. Although educational access for both men and women has increased dramatically in Cape Verde over the past several decades, illiteracy rates among women remain very high—38 percent for women in urban areas and 44 percent for women in rural areas (Africa for Women's Rights, 2010). Moreover, Cape Verdean culture is extremely patriarchal; a very strict division of domestic labor that has been observed for centuries prevails. As the accounts of the Cape Verdean women who participated in this study revealed, women are

responsible for all domestic work including cooking, cleaning, and the rearing of children (Carter and Aulette 2009; Stanford 2011). Although domestic violence against women and children, sexual harassment, and the sexual exploitation of women and minors is widespread, are recognized as national problems, and have been legislated against, these crimes are seldom prosecuted because they are culturally condoned by much of the wider society (U.S. Department of State 2010).

While polygamy is not legal, it is common for men to live and father children with several different women simultaneously (Carter and Aulette 2009), a practice that several of the Cape Verdean women who participated in this study indicated had disrupted their own lives. In addition, emigration rates for men are extremely high, both of which have resulted in large numbers of single-mother households. According to the 2000 census, 41 percent of families in Cape Verde were headed by women, and 30 percent of these were living below the poverty level, which is currently about 25 percent (Stanford 2011; Cape Verde Against Poverty 2011). The explanatory frameworks Cape Verdean mothers used to transmit educational values to their daughters were informed by these socio-historical and economic realities. Narratives of "educational opportunity/family responsibility" were aimed at encouraging daughters to take advantage of educational opportunities that mothers and grandmothers were denied because they were women. Mothers encouraged daughters to take advantage of educational opportunities as a strategy for achieving greater economic independence, thereby increasing these women's chances of resisting both the gender subordination and sexual exploitation that were pervasive in Cape Verde.

*African American women.* The "educational opportunity/family responsibility narrative"—encouraging daughters and granddaughters to take advantage of educational opportunities that mothers and grandmothers never had—was also prevalent among the four working class African American women in the study, all of whom were originally from the South. Although these women were long-term residents of Boston, their family roots

remained in the South, and they traveled back and forth between Boston and the southern states of their families' origin to visit family and friends—a common pattern among southern blacks. One of these women received all of her schooling in the South, another received all of her schooling in Boston, and the other two women received their elementary and early secondary educations in the South and then attended Boston Public Schools after migrating with their mothers who had come to Boston to work as domestics for families in Brookline.

Although the migration experience of these African American women was very different from the immigration experience of the Haitian or Cape Verdean women, *the narratives used by their mothers and grandmothers were quite similar*. A 59 year old African American woman, whose experience was typical of this group, described the rationale behind the active encouragement she received thus:

My grandmother only went to the fourth grade. I was raised by my dad's mother and father in [the South], and education was very important to them because they didn't have an opportunity, so it was like read this, read that, write this, write that. So at a very early age you started writing letters for the older people. Some people that were older than my grandparents didn't know how to read and write at all.

We used to help them learn the ABCs and to write their names. And some of these people were like in their sixties and seventies. And they would give you little gifts. They would give you what they had to give. And one time, a woman made me a beautiful quilt. So that was what put a dollar sign on education for me.

We were taught that if you had education, you could do most anything that you really wanted to do, and so it was very, very important. You could write your own ticket. You didn't have to stay down there [in the South] and work for \$3.00 a day sharecropping.

In the case of the African American women from the South, active encouragement was framed through the expectation that daughters and granddaughters had a responsibility to take advantage of educational opportunities that older family members did not have because of their race/ethnicity. Following from this was, in some cases, the expectation that these daughters and granddaughters should also take responsibility for helping those members of their family and/or community who had not had an opportunity for schooling. By conveying these messages in this way, both mothers and grandmothers provided a

crucial socio-historical context for explaining why their daughters and granddaughters should value education *as black women*. These explanatory frameworks initiated daughters and granddaughters into African American women's legacy of resistance to both gender and racial/ethnic oppression. In doing so, these African American mothers and grandmothers were engaged in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

*The African American socio-historical context.* For the African American women who participated in the study, the narrative of "educational opportunity/family responsibility" linked the value of education to a much broader history of racial segregation and inequality in the U.S. system of public education. When mothers and grandmothers conveyed the expectation of a responsibility to take advantage of educational opportunities that older members of their families and/or communities had not had, and to then use their educations to help those who had been less fortunate, these daughters and granddaughters were brought into the African American legacy of racial struggle for equal educational access. Following is a very brief history of the socio-historical context grounding these explanatory frameworks.

Although schools, some of which received public funding, existed before the 19th century in America, an institutionalized system of age-graded, hierarchically structured, and bureaucratized public education did not evolve until the late-19th century, doing so within the relatively short span of fifty years (Katz 1987, 1995). Although the commitment to educate all children was considered the most "distinctive American public policy of the early nineteenth century, blacks were excluded" (Katznelson and Weir, qtd. in Katz 1995:105): "American educational policy for slave children was 'compulsory ignorance.' Most never saw the inside of a school or received instruction. Ignorance was the primary instrument of enslavement" (Weinberg 1977:11). Northern states had legally abolished educational segregation by the late-19th century, but intensifying residential segregation translated into the same (Du Bois 1973; Katz 1995).

Residential segregation of African Americans was also universal in the South, but without educational consequences, since assignment to school was based solely on race. Southern whites attended the nearest school. *When one was available*, African Americans attended the "Negro school," wherever located (Weinberg 1977:77). Prior to the post-Civil War Reconstruction era, fewer than 20 percent of African American children had access to education anywhere in the United States—most of it substandard (Du Bois 1973; Weinberg 1977). Du Bois's (1973) analysis acknowledged the relevance of segregation to the African American experience. He argued in 1933 that the central educational issue of concern for African Americans in the United States was institutionalized segregation: "Our education is more and more not only being confined to our own schools but to a segregated public school system far below the average of the nation with one-third of our children continuously out of school" (p. 91).

In 1954, after decades of struggle, the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* made public school segregation in the United States illegal (Feagin and Barnett 2004), yet assessing the effects of continued residential segregation and persistent substandard schooling on the educational inequality and/or opportunity of African Americans continues to be an intensely debated public and scholarly issue (Bell 1992). It is this history of racial struggle for equal access to educational opportunity that informed the explanatory frameworks that African American mothers and grandmothers used to transmit educational values to their daughters and granddaughters. Narratives of "educational opportunity/family responsibility" were aimed at encouraging daughters to take advantage of educational opportunities that mothers and grandmothers were denied primarily because of their race, thereby using education as a means of resisting continued racial subordination. By framing their encouragement in this way, African American mothers and grandmothers emphasized that education was as much, if not more, about promoting the welfare of kinship and

community as it was about individual opportunity. In doing so, they engaged a political process—the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

Offering Encouragement: The "Educational Attainment/Work Opportunity" Narrative

Although four of the six Latinas in the study and one of the three Irish American women were also required to attend school, and received active encouragement for doing so, none of the accounts of these women reflected the pronounced inter-generational narrative linking educational opportunity and family/community responsibility that was so prevalent in the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women's accounts. However, these Latinas and Irish American women were also offered explanatory frameworks for why education was important by family members, mostly mothers. These frameworks often drew a direct link between educational attainment and work opportunity expressed as: *You need to stay in school and get your education to insure your own later success in life*. In other words, this "educational attainment/work opportunity" narrative *takes educational opportunity as a given* (i.e., educational opportunity is assumed); therefore, the notion of a responsibility to take advantage of educational opportunities because other family and/or community members from previous generations had not had them was not a significant factor. One important reason for this is the relative age of the Latinas and Irish American women, most of whom were a generation younger than the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African women as a group. Therefore, for the most part, the Latina and Irish American mothers did not perceive that they had faced limited educational opportunities because of their race/ethnicity.

Only one Latina, a 39 year old Puerto Rican woman, indicated that her mother had not had an opportunity for schooling. On the other hand, all of the Latinas and Irish American women had both parents and siblings who had dropped out of school, and their mothers made it clear that they did not want them to do the same, which was a subtext of this "educational attainment/work opportunity" narrative. For example, in the context of her

older sister having dropped out of school, a 38 year old Irish American woman's mother told her: "If you don't have your education you can't move on, you need your education to move further on in your life." A typical response from one of the Latinas, a 28 year old who was both required and encouraged to attend school:

My parents always told me to go to school, and my siblings. So I always had some encouragement to go to school. They were very positive and strict about it because my older sister dropped out in the 12th grade.

And they talked to me about how school was important for me because if I didn't finish school, I wouldn't be able to get a good job to support myself.

Although many of the Cape Verdean, Haitian, and African American women indicated that they understood there was a direct link between educational attainment and work opportunity and had mothers and grandmothers who drew this link for them in their explanations of why education was important (e.g. "You could write your own ticket." and "The school is your future."), this connection was *secondary* in the narrative conveyed to them by their mothers and grandmothers; whereas, for these Latinas and the Irish American woman, the connection between education and work was central in the narratives conveyed to them by their mothers.

Most of the Latinas and Irish American women who were required to attend school had been raised in households where their mothers worked outside the home, and in many cases, these mothers provided the sole or primary source of income for their families. However, only two of these nine mothers had earned a high school diploma; none of the Latina mothers had done so. All of the Latinas and Irish American women were made aware of the hardships their mothers had faced in trying to earn an adequate living income with limited education. As one Latina explained her mother's rationale:

She knew me and my sisters were going to have to work whether we wanted to or not, so we had better get the education, the diploma. I mean my mom had dropped out of school in the 9th grade and went to work, and my two older sisters dropped out and went to work, and all of them were working two or three jobs just to try to make ends meet.

And I mean they weren't really even making ends meet! So that's all I heard—finish school, finish school, finish school. I mean it was like she was saying: "Finish school or you will end up like me." And I could see what she meant.

Latina and Irish American mothers encouraged their daughters to take advantage of educational opportunities as a means of preparing themselves to compete for living wage work. In other words, these mothers emphasized the importance of education to their daughters primarily *as women workers*. Therefore, it was the experience of social class subordination that informed the explanatory frameworks that Latina and Irish American mothers used to transmit educational values to their daughters. By conveying these messages in this way, Latina and Irish American mothers were actively resisting social class subordination; through this resistance they created possibilities for engaging in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

*Tensions between Latina mothers and their daughters.* At the same time, there were serious tensions between some Latina mothers' requirement and encouragement that their daughters attend school and these mothers' insistence that their daughters simultaneously accept, in some cases, enormous domestic responsibilities for housework and the care of younger siblings. Four of the six Latinas in the study reported that they were the principle caretakers of their younger siblings while their mothers worked, often nights. From a 38 year old Latina (Nicaraguan) woman:

I had some real struggles as a teenager, but I was the oldest, and I had to take care of my two younger brothers. That's what my mother taught me that I had to take care of the family. And it was a lot of work because you had to take care of everything for them, and for myself too. And besides all of this, try to go to school.

This woman was responsible for most of the household chores that maintained her family, including shopping for food, preparing meals, doing laundry, and cleaning house. Below, an account of what a 20 year old Latina's mother, who also required her to accept full responsibility for housework and the care of younger siblings, "always" told her when speaking to her about school attendance or the importance of education:

Well, my mom always encouraged me to go to school and to do well in school. She would say get yourself together, get it going, do what you got to do. But the things she would be strict on, like she cared about school, and she was not happy if I got bad grades, but she wasn't really strict on it, she was more like learn to clean bathrooms. So my mom told me that school was important, but she also taught me that *having a clean house was more important*.

These accounts reflect the tensions created when mothers both required and encouraged school attendance, but prioritized fulfilling domestic responsibilities for family.

The adolescent girls that Dodson (1999) studied from the Boston area were described as liking some parts of the autonomy and authority involved in providing child care (or "tending") to younger siblings. However, Dodson also found, as I have in this study that . . .

when helping with child care meant filling the shoes of a primary parent, girls were almost always resentful, believing they had lost part of their own childhood. And in the fractures and upheaval which visit many low-income families, young children are often left in the substitute care of older siblings. (P. 23).

The Latinas in this study who were delegated the responsibility of functioning as "primary parent" to younger siblings resented the intrusion into their own lives. In addition, all of the Latinas began their first paid employment as teenagers—entering the paid work force earlier than any of the other women in the study; therefore, along with responsibility for housework and the care of younger siblings, most of these Latinas found it necessary to earn income as well, often in an effort to supplement their family's financial contribution to their schooling. Therefore, the Latinas who participated in the study appeared to have the most complex (and difficult) relationships with education of all of the racial/ethnic groups. However, these Latinas were as likely as the other women to develop critical thinking skills over their non-traditional educational trajectories and to use these skills to interrogate the conditions and consequences of their oppression.

#### The Insignificance of Fathers and Grandfathers

A final consideration concerning the social process of requiring and encouraging school attendance is that fathers and grandfathers, when present, were much less

significant in this social process, as noted at the beginning of this section. Nine of the sixteen women who were encouraged to attend school had fathers, step-fathers, or grandfathers who were living in their households at the time they attended elementary school or high school; seven of the women were raised by single mothers or grandmothers. In the case of the Haitian and Cape Verdean women, fathers, even when present in the household, took no responsibility for conveying messages about the value of education to their children. As a 30 year old Cape Verdean woman made clear when asked about her father's contribution, "In Cape Verde, if you need something you go to your mother, not to your father. Anything I need, I go to my mother." When asked about her father's contribution to the messages she had received about education from her mother, a 55 year old Cape Verdean woman elaborated:

My father was the same. He followed what my mother does. Because he always went to work, and my mother stayed home and did everything. He had no power like with the kids because my mom was the one who watches over us and keeps us going the right way. So my mother was a good mother about education any way she could be, and she worked hard for us.

Only one of the African American women was raised with a father in the household, in this case a paternal grandfather, whose wife, her grandmother, owned and operated a coal heating business. This woman had this to say about her grandfather:

And my grandfather, he had nothing to do with my grandmother's coal business. He drove long distance truck for another company. I resent a man who can't do anything, and that's from my grandmother; my grandmother put that on me. My grandfather couldn't nail a nail! Every time my grandmother needed something done she had to do it herself or get somebody—little simple stuff. So if a man is like that, it's bad. And so he had nothing to do with her coal business.

Although this woman's grandfather was present in the household, he was not instrumental in the process of conveying messages about the importance of education. This woman's grandmother ran both her own business and her own household, and, as the excerpt above demonstrates, the grandfather was not considered particularly resourceful.

The Latinas' fathers who were present were equally inconsequential in their daughters' accounts of the encouragement they received from their families. One Latina made only a brief mention of "parents" that obviously included her father, but said nothing more about him. Another Latina, for whom a stepfather was present, identified her poor quality relationship with him as part of the reason she ran away from home and dropped out of school. Finally, the one Irish American woman who was required and encouraged to attend school by her mother replied when asked about her father's contribution: "My mother was very strict with me about school. But my father, he could care less. He was always drunk." Therefore, even when fathers or grandfathers were present, their contributions to conveying messages about the importance of education, if any, were relatively insignificant, and some were counterproductive. Therefore, most opportunities for resisting gender, racial/ethnic, and/or social class subordination through the transmission of educational values came from mothers and grandmothers.

#### Family as a Transmitter of Educational Values: Summary and Discussion

This chapter has focused on explaining why educationally disadvantaged women value education by identifying the family socialization processes through which educational values are transmitted to them. Requiring and enforcing school attendance and offering active encouragement through explanatory frameworks that conveyed the importance of education to daughters and granddaughters were the most important social processes for transmitting educational values.

The requirement to attend school and the encouragement to do so, regardless of how they were framed, were clearly the province of mothers and grandmothers. Indeed, one of the most universal characteristics of the families described by the women who were required and encouraged to attend school is that their families were both mother-headed and women-identified, even when fathers or grandfathers were present in the household. These women—both mothers and grandmothers—took responsibility for the social processes

that transmitted educational values to their daughters and granddaughters through their families: They required attendance in school and enforced this requirement when necessary; they worked hard to provide the material necessities for their daughters and granddaughters to be able to attend school; and they encouraged their daughters and granddaughters to attend and finish school by offering them explanations for why education was important to them *as women, as black women, and as women workers*. In all cases, mothers and grandmothers were creating a space for the practice of active resistance. As they conveyed the importance of education to their daughters and granddaughters through their knowledge (i.e., explanatory frameworks) of gender, racial/ethnic, and social class oppression, these Cape Verdean, Haitian, African American, Latina, and Irish American women were also engaged in the political process of achieving a standpoint.

The "educational opportunity/family responsibility" narrative offered by the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American mothers and grandmothers was aimed at encouraging daughters and granddaughters to take advantage of educational opportunities that mothers and grandmothers had been denied, either because they were women or because they were black women. In addition, these narratives conveyed the expectation that daughters and granddaughters should accept responsibility for using their educations to help others in their families and communities who had been less fortunate. Indeed, the desire to help others was a primary reason given by many of the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women for aspiring to post-secondary education. Many of these women focused on the "helping professions"—e.g., teaching, nursing, social work, ministry—when they discussed their occupational and/or professional goals and interests, linking their educational aspirations and expectations directly to them. In doing so, they reinforced the values, beliefs, and expectations of the dominant culture, as well as the gendered expectations of their own racial/ethnic group. At the same time, the transmission of educational values

made it more likely that they would use education to develop a critical awareness (i.e., consciousness) of the organization of their oppression.

The "educational attainment/work opportunity" narrative offered by the Latina and Irish American mothers was aimed at encouraging daughters to take advantage of educational opportunities that their siblings, and in some cases these mothers themselves, believed they had relinquished when they dropped out of high school. These mothers focused on the importance of education as a way of avoiding the hardship and struggle of attempting to support a family through the lower-skilled, low-paying jobs that they had held for most of their lives, which they attributed to the fact that they did not have the educational credentials to qualify for anything better. These Latina and Irish American mothers had learned from their own life experiences that their daughters would need to work to support themselves and their children, whether they were married or not, and they wanted their daughters to have access to the working benefits that are generally available only to those who are more highly educated, including an adequate living income through which to support themselves and their families. As they transmitted educational values to their daughters, they also created potential spaces of resistance.

Whereas the Haitian and Cape Verdean women's mothers and grandmothers focused on encouraging them to value education primarily as a means of resisting gender subordination, and the African American women's mothers and grandmothers focused on encouraging them to value education primarily as a means of resisting racial subordination, the Latina and Irish American women's mothers focused on encouraging them to value education primarily as a means of resisting social class subordination. In all three of these cases, mothers and grandmothers were providing rationales for the importance of education that were grounded in the broader socio-historical and economic contexts that had informed their own lives. However, for the Haitian and Cape Verdean women, these contexts changed dramatically when they immigrated to the United States. As black women, they too became

situated within the broader socio-historical and economic contexts that inform systems of gender, racial/ethnic, and social class stratification in the United States.

Both of the explanatory frameworks used by mothers and grandmothers to convey the importance of education can be understood as forms or strategies of resistance that are mediated within the parameters of broader structural constraints. In other words, these explanatory frameworks conveyed the importance of education within specific socio-cultural and economic contexts that attached dual meanings to them. On the one hand, mothers and grandmothers understood education as a means through which their daughters and granddaughters could resist gender, racial/ethnic, and/or social class subordination, thereby achieving greater socioeconomic independence. On the other hand, these frameworks reinforced the dominant cultural belief in education as the primary means for ameliorating poverty and inequality, both individually and collectively, legitimating the very institutional arrangements that inspired this resistance. In other words, social processes of the transmission of educational values place power and domination, resistance and autonomy in dialectical relationship. Practicing resistance requires that educationally disadvantaged women interrogate these dialectical relationships toward the end of achieving a standpoint.

In contrast to the women above, one of the most universal characteristics of the families described by the women who were neither required nor encouraged to attend school was the absence of supportive mothers or grandmothers in households that were extremely male-dominated, rather than mother-headed or woman-identified. For example, three of these four women had lived with their fathers at some point in their educational life histories, and the fourth woman had lived with an uncle. The Latina who was discouraged from attending school by her mother indicated that her stepfather dominated the household, and her mother acquiesced to his interests and priorities. The other Latina who was neither required nor encouraged to attend school lived with her father, who took no interest in her schooling. The Irish American woman who was removed from her mother's custody because

of sexual abuse by her stepfather indicated that when he was indicted, her mother deserted her and fled with the stepfather. Finally, the young Irish American woman whose mother had committed suicide when she was five years old lived with her abusive alcoholic father until she was eleven years old. In other words, what all of these women had in common was having spent formative years living in male-dominated households where they experienced abuse and/or neglect.

## CHAPTER 4: EXPERIENCES IN ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL

This chapter addresses the early schooling experiences of the women who participated in the study—their experiences in elementary and secondary school. For the purposes of this research, schooling is considered a set of institutional arrangements and practices that provide a crucial social context for the transmission of educational values. I focus specifically on analyzing the women's early schooling experiences by race/ethnicity. The first section of the chapter provides an analysis of the quality of these early schooling experiences in terms of their level of integration with family. The second section describes the experiences of the thirteen women in the study who had dropped out of high school, focusing on their reasons for doing so.

### EARLY SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES: THE INTEGRATION OF SCHOOLING WITH FAMILY

As a set of institutional arrangements and practices, early schooling provided an important social context for the transmission of educational values, one closely aligned with family. Most research that has addressed the quality of educationally disadvantaged women's early schooling has focused on the experiences of women who have dropped out of high school. These studies have found that women who dropped out of school generally described positive early schooling experiences in elementary school but progressively more negative schooling experiences as they moved through middle school and into high school (Fine 1991; Rivera 2008; Way 1998). The analysis in this chapter substantiates these findings for the most part; however, most of the women in this study who described positive early schooling experiences in elementary school *also* described mostly positive schooling experiences in high school. Moreover, women whose early schooling was well integrated with family described more positive early schooling experiences than did those women whose early schooling was poorly integrated with family. In addition, women who recalled

having had teachers who supported, encouraged, and/or inspired them in some way described much more positive early schooling experiences than those who did not.

The sixteen women who were both required and encouraged to attend school reported much more positive early schooling experiences than the four women who were not—two Latinas and two Irish American women—each of whom described negative early schooling experiences. In general, the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women described more positive early schooling experiences than did the Latinas or Irish American women whose experiences were more mixed—some were positive, but most were negative. Eight of the thirteen women who had dropped out of high school described mostly positive early schooling experiences, and five of these women described mostly negative early schooling experiences.

#### Positive Experiences: Early Schooling Is Well Integrated with Family

One of the defining characteristics of early schooling for those women who reported positive early schooling experiences was the integration of schooling, particularly elementary-level schooling, with family. Thirteen of the sixteen women who were both required and encouraged to attend school described positive early schooling experiences in both elementary and secondary school. Moreover, for those African American women who received most of their early schooling in the South, positive early schooling experiences were well integrated with both family *and community*. In addition, all of the women who described positive early schooling experiences identified particular teachers by name who had supported and encouraged them in some way, often focusing their accounts of their early schooling on these teachers and their influence.

#### *Haitian and Cape Verdean Women*

Schooling that was well integrated with family was particularly the case for the Haitian and Cape Verdean women, all of whom experienced their early educations in their native countries. A 46 year old, middle-class Haitian woman who attended private school

commented that her first teachers were very young women who were "so nice and kind that they were like mothers to us, and when we had food, they would sit at our table and eat with us like a family." A 39 year old, working-class Cape Verdean woman who attended public school commented: "Oh, all of my teachers loved me. My fourth grade teacher was almost like a mother to me. I always used to be a good model for the class. I obeyed and completed all the school requirements. I wanted my mother and older sisters to be proud of me. " This woman, the youngest of a single mother's four daughters, was the only one in her family to receive any formal schooling.

*Support and encouragement from teachers.* Supportive teachers were the norm for the Haitian and Cape Verdean women. All of these women remembered particular teachers by name and spoke of these teachers with admiration and respect, emphasizing their helpfulness and encouragement. A 26 year old working-class Cape Verdean woman who went on to attain a master's degree in economics in her native country described her early schooling experiences thus:

When I went to the second grade, [.....] was my teacher, and she was a very good teacher, a new teacher. And I can say that I learned because she would baby me to learn. She always tried to help me. She would even come to my house to explain things for me. She was a good teacher. And she always told me over and over that I was a good girl and a very smart girl. She wanted me to know that.

And I remember when I was in the sixth grade, I was the best student in the class, and all my teachers congratulated me for my work, and they called my mother and told her that I was a very good student. And when they told my mother this, she was very proud of me because I was a girl who did not have help at home because my mother didn't go to school, and she didn't know anything about schooling.

And in my family, I have four brothers, and my mom is a single woman. We didn't grow up with a father because he left us when I was young. And my mother worked hard to put all five of us in school. She was a very good mother because she raised us all, and she put us all in school, and that is very hard to do in Cape Verde.

The Haitian and Cape Verdean women all described the sacrifices their mothers had made to send them to school in countries where access to education had been so severely limited

and where the social and cultural value of educating women had been traditionally questioned.

*Cooperation between teachers and mothers.* Encouragement from teachers and cooperation between teachers and mothers was typical in the Haitian and Cape Verdean women's accounts of their early schooling experiences. A 55 year old, working-class Cape Verdean woman explained how her teachers and her mother cooperated with each other to coordinate her early elementary-level schooling:

My first memory of school, I remember it was my first year, the first day I went to school. And my mother walked me to school. And my mother told [the teacher]: "I bring my daughter here to you. In my house I am her mother, but here you are her mother. So teach her everything that is necessary for her to learn, and when she gets home, I will see how she does." They were together on this.

Every mother did this. The mother kept everything sent from the teacher and helped the teacher from the home. So I was in between my teacher and my mother. So everything I did wrong at school, my mother would know. The teacher would write a note to my mother and tell me that I had to bring an answer back from her. My teacher and my mother were together on this. So I learned to respect my teacher as I respected my mother. And this is how I learned that school is very important, from my mother and my teacher, together.

Like the woman above, most of the Haitian and Cape Verdean women attributed their understanding of the importance of education, at least in part, to the close and cooperative relationships that were established and maintained between their mothers and their teachers during their elementary school years.

*High academic expectations and rigor the norm.* While support and encouragement from teachers and cooperative relationships between teachers and mothers were defining characteristics of the elementary schooling of the Haitian and Cape Verdean women who participated in the study, high academic expectations and academic rigor was the defining characteristic of their secondary-level schooling. All of these women had attended high school in their native countries, and four of the six had completed their secondary educations; three of these women went on to complete college in Cape Verde. Only two of the Cape Verdean women dropped out of high school (See Chapter 2, Table 2.1: Prior

Educational Attainment by Race/Ethnicity). Although all of these women remembered particular teachers, it was the quality of their teaching and their competence in challenging academic contexts that these women emphasized. For example, when asked if any one grade level or teacher stood out for her, the middle-class Haitian woman answered:

Yes. Especially one. The last class for middle school. Teachers for middle school taught discipline. It was the step when you had to leave middle school to go on to high school. Teachers made sure you had all the knowledge you needed to have, and they sometimes wanted you to stay over to make sure you had all you needed, especially in math and writing skills, because after this session, you had to take a test from the state.

And that test was given outside the school in an auditorium with many other students. And if you didn't pass that test, you couldn't go on to high school. So they wanted to make sure you had what you needed to pass the test. They stressed that you were there to prepare to pass the test. That's all, to pass the test.

There were three separate classrooms but the three teachers worked together to make sure you learned what was necessary; they did the curriculum together. Those teachers impressed me and my life. And those three teachers are still alive, and one is still teaching at the same school.

This woman went on to explain that instruction was very different in Haiti than in the United States, and she emphasized the academic rigor of the curriculum:

In Haiti school is very tough because we study by memorizing. If you have a book you may learn everything in the book by memorizing. Then you have to close the book and repeat everything in it. It was like this. But by the time you did that, you could then comprehend it and explain it in your own words.

But at the beginning it was very tough. So Haitian students are very good memorizers. And we also learn by observing. We have field trips and then apply what we learn from the book to our observations. It's tough but you learn, and you don't forget. This is how we were taught, by memorizing and by observing.

The Cape Verdean women offered similar accounts of secondary-level instruction that required discipline and sustained effort. When a 30 year old, working-class Cape Verdean woman who had described her studies as difficult and challenging was asked whether she liked high school she said: "Oh yes, I loved it. I loved high school. It was good. But you had to make your grade. You had two chances. And if you failed, well you couldn't go on in

public high school if you didn't make your grade." When a 60 year old, middle-class Cape Verdean woman was asked if one grade level or teacher stood out for her she replied:

Yes, I had a very good teacher in my quarter class. It was a class that we had to take at the end of high school; it was a class to prepare for college. And it was very challenging. Yes, I remember [the teacher] very well. And at that time there was no public education. It was our parents who paid for schooling; it was private school, and [the teacher] was very good. I was very well prepared because of his class.

As noted in the preceding chapter, educational opportunities for the mothers and grandmothers of the Haitian and Cape Verdean women were severely limited; only one of these mothers had any formal schooling at all, which was limited to a few years of elementary-level education. However, as one of the Cape Verdean women explained: "Even though my mother didn't go to school, she knew education was important for us." Thus, as established in Chapter 3, the Haitian and Cape Verdean mothers and grandmothers used the explanatory frameworks through which they conveyed the importance of education to create potential spaces for resistance to gender subordination and exploitation.

Each of the Haitian and Cape Verdean women expressed gratitude and appreciation for both mothers and teachers who were committed to providing them with as many educational opportunities as possible. Because these Haitian and Cape Verdean women were of the first generations of women that were being educated in their countries of origin in any numbers, they understood educational access as an opportunity; indeed, most of the immigrant women who participated in this study came to the United States with the intention of accessing publically provided education.

### *African American Women*

Most of the African American women also reported "very positive" early schooling experiences. However, for the African American women, a defining characteristic of their early schooling was that it was well integrated with both family *and community*. Three of the five African American women replied, when asked whether they remembered liking or disliking school, that they "loved" school," and another said she "liked school very much."

As noted in Chapter 3, the four working-class African American women in the study had migrated with their families to Boston from the South. One of these women received all of her schooling in the South, two women received most of their elementary schooling and early secondary schooling in the South and their later secondary schooling in Boston, and the fourth woman received all of her schooling in Boston. The fifth African American woman was middle-class, a native of Boston.

*Early schooling in the South.* Two of the African American women who had attended elementary school in the South were exceptionally enthusiastic about describing their early schooling experiences, which they found extremely fulfilling. For example, when asked to imagine herself going back in time to discover where this long journey in her education began, a 59 year old African American woman elaborated:

It began on our front porch in [the South]. I have three aunts that are only a couple of years older than I am and a real good friend, and we used to play school, so they were the teachers, and we knew, I knew so much by the time I went to first grade that I had forgotten my ABCs.

At that time they didn't have, well this was the fifties, and they didn't have kindergarten for black children, so our kindergarten was on the front porch on a sunny day, or in the house on a rainy day. We played school a lot. And this is what everyone did. The older children got the younger ones ready for school. Because you see my grandmother raised me, and most older people her age down there didn't have the opportunity for any schooling, so my aunts got me ready for school.

And in May, just before the end of school, just to start us getting used to coming, we could go to school with our older siblings. And I went with my aunts. We would sit at a desk with whoever we came with, just to get familiarized with school and the blackboard and all. And we knew all the teachers because it was a small town. And we already knew which class we wanted to be in. And I just loved going to school with my aunts. It was so much fun.

At this time in the South, public schools were still racially segregated by law, and, as this woman's account reveals, kindergarten was not available to black children. However, as was the custom then, she received her early instruction from her aunts, who were a few years older than her, because her grandmother, who raised her, could neither read nor write.

A 58 year old African American woman was equally enthusiastic when asked to recall her earliest memories of school in the South:

Okay, first day. First day of first grade was exciting. I started school when I was five and a half years old. That first day was a journey of a lifetime. I met my best friend. She and I have been friends for fifty-one, going on fifty-two years. And it has been a journey. She still lives [down South], I live here [in Boston], and I get to see her at least two or three times a year, and we are still good friends.

When I started school, school was fun to me. Especially in first, second, third grades. Oh, it was fun to me, and I got a chance to do a lot of things. I learned a lot of things that I didn't know, and we had the same teacher from the first grade to the eighth grade. Matter of fact, the school is still there, and she is still there, and my family is still there. It just brings back memories of my school and family.

When asked if one grade level or teacher stood out for her she replied:

Sure does. Miss [...]. That's my teacher from the first grade to the eighth grade. She stands out a lot. And Rev. [...] the principal, he stands out a lot. Because in those days they could spank you, and he did exactly that with a leather strap. Prayer was in then! The school could pray. And we also had religious teaching in school.

This woman's account reveals other common features of 1950s public schooling for African Americans in the South—the one-teacher school and instruction in religion. However, these women found their early schooling experiences to be very rewarding. These accounts also show how early schooling experiences were well integrated with both family and community for those women who received schooling in the South.

*Early schooling in Boston.* For the working-class African American women who experienced most of their secondary schooling in Boston Public Schools, schooling experiences were also positive but somewhat less well integrated with family. For example, the working-class African American woman who experienced all of her schooling in Boston reported positive early schooling experiences and was equally enthusiastic about describing them, identifying a number of teachers that stood out for her: "And I remember Mr. [...], he was the geography teacher, and he was very nice, a very nice guy. And the principals too. They all adored me. And I loved middle school. Middle school was so much fun for me." However, beyond describing memorable teachers and expressing how much they

enjoyed attending school, none of these African American women's accounts reflected the high level of family and community integration that was so prevalent among those African American women who received most of their early schooling in the South.

On the other hand, the middle-class African American woman, a native of Boston who had attended private schools in the City was an exception. She describe very positive early schooling experiences that *were* well integrated with family. Her mother, who was a teacher herself, was very involved in her schooling. This African American woman's account of her early schooling reflected a high level of integration with family and community in a typically middle-class urban context:

Well, my mother was a teacher, like I said. So I was led to believe by everyone around me that education was important. But my mother, she just took it and ran with it. She was really just the strongest person about it. But I always liked school, reading books, etc. And I liked all the activities too, though sometimes I got tired, a little stressed out with all of it. But my mom kept me moving.

So, I was led to believe that education was important and that the social part of learning was equally important. The private schools I went to, it all went together hand-in-hand. The academic went with the social. I did clubs, and lessons, and summer sports and academic camps. And my mother was involved with all of it.

Therefore, for most of the African American women, early schooling experiences were positive and well integrated with both family and community. The African American women conveyed the sense that they had developed both socially and academically as a result of their early schooling experiences and that they were, for the most part, well satisfied with their early schooling experiences.

#### *Latinas and Irish American Women: Teachers Made the Difference*

Although the Latinas' and Irish American women's early schooling experiences were generally negative and were poorly integrated with family, two Latinas and one Irish American woman—each of whom were both required and encouraged to attend school—did describe some positive early schooling experiences. It was supportive teachers who made the difference for these women, which helped to compensate for early schooling experiences

that were poorly integrated with family. These women focused their accounts on the influence of involved teachers; however, none of the other Latinas or Irish American women mentioned teachers as a positive influence in their accounts of their early schooling. For example, when asked if she remembered liking school or disliking school, a 38 year old (Nicaraguan) Latina who experienced her earlier schooling in her native country replied:

I remember liking school because in elementary school I was very social. I was kind of active. Well, I was very active. I was dancing; I was into the arts. I went to a Catholic school, and the nuns who taught us provided leadership. They introduced a lot of choices. And later there was acting and singing. And I won an award for singing. There were a lot of competitions. I remember that first prize; they gave me a book. And so this was my motivation to go to school.

Although this account focused on the extra-curricular and social aspects of her schooling, this Latina reported that she also did very well in school academically. In addition, this account shows how this Latina's early schooling experiences were shaped by the support and encouragement of the nuns who were her teachers. In the midst of the Sandinista Revolution, these nuns provided schooling that was, although poorly integrated with family, very well integrated with religious community, which made the difference for this woman.

When asked about her first memory of school, a 20 year old Latina who reported that she "liked school very much" described her experience of first grade, focusing her account on the significant impact of her first grade teacher:

I started school in [a town near Boston], and it was a brand new school, and I remember getting there on the busses on the day of the school opening. And the teacher was Mrs. [...], and I still remember her.

And well, I did really well in first grade, and I also think that how you do in school has a lot to do with the teacher. She was a very sweet teacher, and I really learned a lot. And I actually, you know at that age your grades are numbers, one through four, and I remember everyone being really proud that I made all fours. I did a very good job in the first grade.

This Latina began struggling with math in the 4th grade and discussed her academic difficulties with math at length. But she also had some very positive academic experiences

that continued into high school. Again, her account focused on a teacher who had inspired her:

Well, I started high school, and I did very well in English. My teacher's name was Miss [...], and I made all A's in the class the whole year. I loved my English class *because she was a great English teacher!* We started with Shakespeare.

We actually had student of the week every week, and you had to be there every day, be on time, and that was the first class of the day for me. And you had to have a "B" average on all of your work, and I had an "A" average on everything! So I was student of the week every week for the whole year, and by the end of the school year [with laughter] no one even clapped for me anymore.

Although the Latinas generally described negative early schooling experiences, as noted above, women who focused their accounts on teachers who had inspired or influenced them in some positive way described much more positive early schooling experiences.

The one Irish American woman who described positive early schooling experiences was both required and encouraged to attend school by her mother; however, her father was an alcoholic, abusive to her as well as to her mother and older sister. When asked if she remembered liking school or disliking school she replied "Oh, I loved school, especially high school. I loved high school." When asked if one particular teacher or event stood out for her, this woman replied:

Yea, [..... High], it was my freshman year, and I was scared to death, wasn't sure if I was going to fit in, and I met this one teacher, her name was [...]. She was amazing, took me under her wing, and she mothered me so I wouldn't be so nervous or scared. Took me under her wing. I'll remember her till the day I die. This teacher was amazing, and I had her freshman year, sophomore year, junior year. I had her all four years. Yea, for different courses; I had her all four years, so it was amazing!

As was typical of those women who described positive early schooling experiences, this woman went on to identify several other teachers, as well as counselors and principals, who had taken a special interest in her progress, countering the effects of early schooling that was poorly integrated with family. For the three women above, the effects of early schooling experiences that were poorly integrated with family were compensated for by teachers,

counselors, and administrators who demonstrated interest in both their educational achievement and their personal well-being.

#### Negative Experiences: Early Schooling Is Poorly Integrated with Family

Seven of the twenty women who participated in the study described negative early schooling experiences that were poorly integrated with family, and most of these women were Latinas or Irish American women. In addition, whereas most of the women who described positive early schooling experiences identified particular teachers by name who had supported and encouraged them and focused their accounts of early schooling on them, none of the women who described negative early schooling experiences did so. Alternatively, women who described negative early schooling experiences emphasized social or academic schooling events that they remembered or discussed their own academic achievements or failures, but did not focus their accounts on particular teachers or other school administrators. Of the sixteen women who were both required and encouraged to attend school, only three described negative early schooling experiences. On the other hand, all four of the women who were neither required nor encouraged to attend school described negative early schooling experiences—two Latinas and two Irish American women.

#### Latinas

Early schooling experiences for the Latinas were mixed—a few were positive, but most were negative. When asked whether any one particular grade level or teacher stood out for them, only one Latina (discussed above) identified a teacher by name; the other five Latinas mentioned only grade levels, often emphasizing academic and/or social challenges faced in those grades. When asked if they remembered liking or disliking school, two of the six Latinas remembered liking school and four remembered disliking school. Although the Latinas above who described positive early learning experiences focused their accounts on teachers who had facilitated their academic success, the Latinas who described negative

early learning experiences focused their accounts on describing the academic difficulties, social adjustment issues, or family problems they had encountered.

A 39 year old Latina who was both required and encouraged to attend school by her mother described her negative schooling experiences thus:

There were times when I felt like there were other kids that were disrupting, and I couldn't focus. I wasn't listening, and I was trying to put a barrier up to all of that, and it wasn't working. I was very distracted.

Even if I put up the walls, I was discouraged because there was other kids that were fooling around, and I wanted to do the same thing. Like, if I don't fool around with them, I'm not going to fit in. While I was trying to learn and focus, I couldn't focus. And then there were other things that were bringing me down, and I was getting teased; I got beat on a lot.

This woman's account is typical of those women who encountered both social adjustment issues and academic difficulties that became overwhelming: being distracted by disruption in the classroom, inability to focus, being targeted by bullies, and feelings of "not fitting in."

A 28 year old Latina who was neither required nor encouraged to attend school explained that her very early schooling had been positive because she had been placed in bilingual classes, but from around the 6th grade on she began having academic difficulties:

Well I went to a lot of schools. All in Boston, but in different neighborhoods. My parents moved around Boston a lot. So I think it was 6th grade when I started having problems. After that I was just depressed and disengaged with all of it. Yea, I was disengaged . . . I started just skipping classes in middle school. Because the days I went to school I would do my work, but I missed a lot. And they just kept on passing me on.

When asked if her parents knew she was skipping school, she replied: "No, they didn't know. Well, I was staying with my father, and he went to work, and I'd just stay home. He didn't know what I did. He didn't really care." Parents who "didn't care" and teachers who "kept passing them on" were common themes in the accounts of the women who were neither required nor encouraged to attend school. When asked if anyone spoke to her about school or education at home this Latina replied:

No, they didn't. My mom didn't finish school herself. She came from Cuba when she was, I think, 18 years old. My dad, he's Puerto Rican. I don't really remember much about their backgrounds.

I didn't have any help with homework. I didn't have any help, so it was tough for me. They didn't speak English, only Spanish. My mom was mostly a stay at home mom. *Education wasn't really important to them because they didn't see what it could do for you.*

As this Latina's account of her negative early schooling experiences shows, for the women who were neither required nor encouraged to attend school, early schooling was often very poorly integrated with family. Equally important, in some cases negative early schooling experiences resulted in the women not being able to develop the social and academic skills they needed to continue their schooling.

### Irish American Women

Early schooling experiences for the Irish American women were also mixed. The woman discussed above, who was both required and encouraged to attend school, described very positive early schooling experiences. However, the other two Irish American women who participated in the study, neither of whom were required nor encouraged to attend school, described mostly negative early schooling experiences that were very poorly integrated with family. When asked to describe or explain her first memory of school, a 31 year old Irish American woman who described positive experiences academically, but negative experiences socially, had this to say:

I liked school for a while. I was always good in math, and I liked going to school just for the math. I hated recess because kids are mean. I was always a heavy kid. So kids are mean, and in retaliation I would throw rocks, something to defend myself, and so I was always in trouble.

I hated elementary school. I was very awkward. I was very heavy, and I wasn't tall. I had these tiny skinny legs, and we went to the museum, and they had stuffed animals, and one of the kids said that a stuffed animal looked like me. It was a water buffalo and had a big body and tiny little legs. And then in middle school I didn't develop until very late, so I was teased about that too.

This woman's mother gave her no encouragement to attend school. She was removed from her mother's custody at the age of twelve because of sexual abuse by her stepfather, who

was convicted of the crime several years later. She spent most of her middle school and high school years in and out of at least five different foster home placements, and then lived with her biological father during most of her senior year of high school.

After explaining the circumstances surrounding her removal from her mother's custody, she went on to describe additional problems with her social adjustment at school:

Then, when I hit puberty, I was still very awkward. And I was a tomboy type. And in between foster homes; I bumped around foster homes a lot. I had a great deal of aggression. I was a very rebellious kid. I was angry at the world, so screw you. But I was always very good at school academically. I never failed. I was never held back.

However, when asked whether she remembered liking school or disliking school she elaborated, focusing on her academic performance and interests:

Oh, I liked school. I loved school. Not so much the people but . . . Dealing with the people was very hard for me. I was more anti-social when I was a kid. I wasn't comfortable in my own skin. But academics were easy for me. Even being a kid with ADHD, academics did not come hard to me. There were times when it was a challenge but not many.

By a challenge, I mean that I struggled more with social studies and history than with math or languages. And I think it was more that it was just too real in many aspects. Like with geography, I was okay with that, no problem. But studying the Holocaust, and slavery, and the Great Depression, I would get physically ill. And I remember learning about how many Jews were actually slaughtered just for being Jewish; it was revolting to me. I was almost traumatized by it. I remember watching *Shindler's List* in class and being really sick, ill, and disgusted. And really angry.

And I remember studying the sinking of the Titanic, and my senior year is when the movie was in the theaters. I was getting ready to graduate. And it was so sad. And everybody was crying because *he* died. But the other people on the ship; this is something that really happened. It was the class issues that bothered me. So, I decided to do my senior research project on that. I analyzed the class issues reflected in the *Titanic*.

I spent three months on the project, and I was heartbroken to get a C-minus because my teacher said that I copied something that wasn't factual, but it was cited appropriately. Still, he wouldn't change the grade. I fought it tooth and nail. No, I wasn't letting it go. So, he ended up giving me a B-plus. But I wanted the "A" I deserved.

Although this woman got very little support or encouragement from adults throughout her elementary school years, she emphasized that because she loved math and reading, school had often provided an "escape" from the abuse and neglect she experienced while in her

mother's custody. As she put it: I had serious abandonment issues and still do, but I wanted to excel academically because I wanted to prove that I was better than my family, *the family that I didn't have*. And I did." This woman's account illustrates the degree to which early schooling was poorly integrated with family among those women who were neither required nor encouraged to attend school.

This woman's account also illustrates how her educational values and the cultivation of her educational aspirations and expectations provided a space for resistance. As noted above, this woman was neither required nor encouraged to attend school. However, she used her early schooling as an escape from abuse and as a vehicle for intellectual development. Her account of how learning about the history of socio-historical injustices affected her demonstrated a strong capacity for critical thinking—the expression of a critical consciousness grounded in her own experience of social class subordination. Moreover, her approach to her senior research project, and her response to being awarded a B-plus for a project that she was determined deserved an "A," indicated that she was using this critical consciousness to actively resist subordination.

*To summarize*, early schooling provided an important social context for the transmission of educational values, one closely aligned with family. Women whose early schooling was well integrated with family described more positive early schooling experiences than did those women whose early schooling was poorly integrated with family. In general, the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women's early schooling was well integrated with family, and the Latinas and Irish American women's early schooling was poorly integrated with family. In addition, women who recalled having had teachers who supported, encouraged, and/or inspired them in some way described much more positive early schooling experiences than women who did not. In general, the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women described more positive early schooling experiences than did the Latinas or Irish American women whose experiences were more mixed—some

were positive, but most were negative. Finally, although negative early schooling experiences created potential spaces for the practice of resistance, only one woman who participated in the study—the Irish American woman above—demonstrated the development of a critical consciousness during her early schooling years.

### DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

This section describes the experiences of the women who had dropped out of high school, focusing on their reasons for doing so. Thirteen of the twenty women who participated in the study had dropped out of high school prior to entering their current adult education and literacy program (or the program from which they had graduated). The other seven women who participated in the study had attained *at least* a U.S. high school diploma or an equivalent secondary-level credential from their native countries (See Chapter 2, Table 2.1: Prior Educational Attainment by Race/Ethnicity). Ten of the thirteen women who had dropped out of high school had been both required and encouraged to attend school by their mothers and/or grandmothers. In other words, of the sixteen women who were both required and encouraged to attend school, ten ended up dropping out. On the other hand, three of the four women who were neither required nor encouraged to attend school ended up dropping out. Eight of the thirteen women who had dropped out of high school described mostly positive early schooling experiences, and five described mostly negative early schooling experiences; whereas, six of the seven women who had completed high school described positive early schooling experiences.

#### Reasons for Dropping Out of School

Each of the thirteen women who had dropped out of high school was asked why she had done so. Table 4.1 below shows the reasons given by the women for dropping out of school by race/ethnicity. Reasons given for dropping out often overlapped resulting in a

chain of circumstances or events; however, each woman identified what she understood as the pivotal reason. As the table shows, only three of these thirteen women indicated

Table 4.1—Reasons for Dropping Out of High School by Race/Ethnicity

Reasons For Dropping Out of School	Race/Ethnicity				Totals
	Cape Verdean Haitian	African American	Latina	Irish American	
Pregnancy	1	1	1		3
Marriage		1			1
Academic difficulties			2		2
Suspended from school				1	1
Family (left home)		1	2		3
Family (financial difficulties)	1	1	1		3
Totals	2	4	6	1	13

pregnancy as their reason for dropping out, and only two indicated dropping out because of academic difficulties. Six of the women said they had dropped out of school because of family problems. Of the three women who "left home," two women "ran away" from home, one to avoid sexual abuse; the other woman was "thrown out" of the household (i.e., forced to leave) by her mother and her stepfather. "Financial difficulties" included cases of dropping out of school to help support one's family through wage-earning work or, alternatively, to stay home and provide full-time childcare so that a parent could work. Finally, one woman was suspended from school several times for violating school rules and for truancy. She was convinced that she would be expelled, so she dropped out instead.

#### Women Regret Having Dropped Out

Many of the women who had dropped out of school expressed regret at having done so, and most took personal responsibility for their decision to drop out or attributed their decision to family circumstances. Only three women who participated in the study attributed their decision to drop out of school to broader social forces or institutional arrangements. As

Table 4.1 above indicates, most of the women reported dropping out of school for reasons other than negative early schooling experiences or academic difficulties. Eight of the thirteen women who dropped out of school indicated that they were doing very well in school both socially and academically at the time they dropped out. A typical response from a 47 year old African American woman who reflected on having dropped out of high school after being asked how she felt about herself as a student and a learner:

Oh, I felt good about myself. I did. And I wanted to graduate. I was doing very well. Academically I was doing very well. I was. I had dreams of doing things when I graduated and all that, you know. I wanted to go to college. I was doing very good up until the 11th grade, and then I started hanging out, hanging out more. And then I got pregnant.

This woman was one of three who had dropped out of school because of pregnancy. A 39 year old Cape Verdean woman also reported that she was doing very well in school socially and academically at the time she became pregnant and dropped out: "And my mother was about to kill me, and my sisters, because my four older sisters wanted the best for me. I was the only one who was sent to school. Everything they didn't get, they wanted for me."

From a 58 year old African American woman who, although she was not pregnant, dropped out of school between the 11th and 12th grades to get married:

Yes. I got promoted to the 12th grade. I'd done very well in school; I had an 83 average when I dropped out. I got promoted to the 12th grade, and I could kick myself in the behind now—because I got married. I got promoted. I didn't even do not one day in the 12th grade, got married in July, got pregnant one month after I was married, and after that it was the kids. Yes, then it was all about family.

I could have went back, but I was so busy that I didn't have the time. Got promoted to the 12th grade, got married, knew the guy 10 months, and I'm now widowed, had four children by him, and I could just cry sometimes. I have. But then I say I have to move on. I'm fifty-eight years old now. What else can I do?

Another woman, a 38 year old (Nicaraguan) Latina who was forced to drop out of the 10th grade to help financially support her family through work, emphasized how disappointed she had been by the circumstances: "And this was a very big struggle for me because I wanted to continue. I was doing very well in school at the time. I had very good friends and a lot of

very good influence, and I was reaching out, and I was very integrated in the community." Most of the women who were doing well in school, yet had dropped out, expressed similar regret, but eventually confronted the circumstances surrounding their decisions for doing so and, although reluctantly, had accepted them.

### Overwhelming Academic Difficulties

Although a number of women who participated in the study reported having encountered academic challenges in their early schooling, often with math, only two women reported that they had dropped out of school because of academic difficulties that they found overwhelming. In both cases, these women blamed themselves for their academic difficulties and school "failure"; neither woman placed any responsibility on schools that had failed to recognize their potential or meet their academic needs. When asked whether she remembered linking school or disliking school, a 39 year old Latina described the broader circumstances surrounding her decision to drop out thus:

I've always liked school, and I never, never wanted to drop out of the 10th grade. When I dropped out of 10th grade, I didn't want to do that. I did that because I felt like I wasn't gripping a lot of the stuff that I needed to learn to move forward from the 10th grade. It was getting harder and harder for me, and I felt like I wasn't learning it. I felt like I wasn't going to pass.

And so I just felt like it's time to go. I don't want to be here no more. I'm not learning. I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do. And the teachers are not going to give me my grades if I don't push myself, and I said it's time to go, and I dropped out. I did it on my own. You know, my mom had no control over that because I was already at the age in the system where I can go, and I didn't really have to go back.

Like several of the Latinas who participated in the study, this woman had experienced academic difficulties in elementary school and continued to fall further behind over time. Math was particularly challenging for her. She commented that she felt like her teachers were simply "passing her on," which had frustrated her. Although this woman had been required and encouraged to attend school by her mother, she had reached an age where her mother's influence was insufficient to keep her from dropping out of school.

Similarly, a 28 year old Latina had dropped out of the 9th grade because of academic difficulties that she found overwhelming. This woman replied when asked how she felt about herself as a student or learner:

I think as a student I was a good student. I wasn't a troublemaker. I had a learning disability that was never diagnosed, and I struggled a lot and wondered why I was never getting it. I would do what I knew how to do, but I was too shy to ask for help.

I dropped out as soon as I could sign myself out. Well, actually I think my mom signed for me, but she said you have to work. But I was already working since I was fifteen, so I didn't care.

This woman also reported that she had struggled academically since her early elementary school years and was so discouraged and "disengaged" with schooling that she no longer saw any point in continuing. In contrast to the women above who were doing well in school both socially and academically at the time they dropped out, these women felt that they were making no academic progress so might as well be working.

#### Family Problems That Lead to Dropping Out

Although many of the women who participated in the study described family problems that had impacted their early schooling in one way or another, six of the women who had dropped out of high school identified family problems as their primary reason for doing so. "Leaving home" and "financial difficulties" were the two main categories of family problems; however, these family problems often evolved into other problems, introducing additional barriers that made it impossible for these women to return to school. The following accounts illustrate the complexity of these problems.

*Leaving home.* A 20 year old Latina dropped out of high school in the process of running away from home. As the oldest child in her family, she had been expected to provide care and supervision for her two younger sisters, who were eight and ten years younger than her, since their birth. She was also expected to do the family's cooking and cleaning—responsibilities that she eventually found overwhelming. She "ran away from

home" in June, a couple of weeks before the end of the school year. She described her circumstances thus:

I had so much responsibility once my sisters were born that I couldn't be a kid myself anymore. And by the time I was ten years old I had so much responsibility in my house that I never played outside anymore like a kid. If I ever went outside, I had to take my baby sisters with me so I could watch them.

This was a lot of it. I was so overwhelmed with all the work and stuff, and then I didn't get along that well with my stepfather. So, my intentions really weren't to drop out of school, but I was only fourteen, and at the end of the 9th grade, and I had run away from home, and I didn't know if the police were looking for me, or what. And so this is how I ended up dropping out; I ran away from home.

This Latina finally returned to both home and school for a few months at the end of the following school year, but at that point she was going to have to repeat the 10th grade. Although she enrolled in school the following fall, she left home again two months later, dropping out of school for the second time. Soon after, she became pregnant. She never returned home again and never went back to high school.

A 25 year old Latina, who was neither required nor encouraged to attend school, faced some academic difficulties in her early elementary schooling, but her academic performance improved throughout middle school and high school. However, as another one of the Latinas who was expected to accept a tremendous amount of responsibility for housework and the care of younger siblings, this woman's mother actively discouraged her from attending school. Family tensions related to her mother and stepfather's expectations of her finally escalated to the point that she was told by them to leave the household; she dropped out of high school in the second semester of the 12th grade. This woman described how being "thrown out of the house" had affected her schooling:

Yea, it was very hard on me. I was in high school, and I was about to graduate. Two months before I was ready to graduate, and I passed all my tests and everything, they [her mother and stepfather] threw me out of the house. But my plans were to finish school and go on to college. I always wanted to be a doctor, a pediatrician. That's what I was working for. That was my goal. And when they told me I had to leave the house, it was like everything just stopped; all of my dreams just ended right there.

Unfortunately this woman's options were very limited. She became pregnant the following year after entering a cohabitating relationship with a man who had offered her a place to live. However, this man became abusive during her pregnancy. After her child was born, the abuse escalated, and she was forced to enlist the support of a domestic violence shelter to escape. Soon after leaving this man, she found that she was pregnant again. She eventually had to relocate from the area to avoid him. She was never able to return to high school to complete the 12th grade.

*Financial difficulties.* A 61 year old African American woman had found it necessary to drop out of the 11th grade to provide childcare for her extended family. She described the circumstances thus:

Well, I always passed in school; I always passed. I would have graduated the next year, but my aunt died, my mother's sister, and I kept her youngest child who wasn't old enough to go to kindergarten; so I stayed home with her. I volunteered to do this because my mother was working, and we needed her income to survive, and she couldn't afford to pay a babysitter. She worked in Brookline as a domestic.

So I just felt that the only choice we had as a family was for me to stay home. Because my aunt was separated from her husband, and she came to live with us when she got sick, and then she died in the hospital and left us with the two small children, and like I said, the youngest wasn't in school yet. So I dropped out to take care of her.

This woman's experience was typical of those who had dropped out of high school because of financial difficulties: These women felt an obligation to help support their families through financial difficulties by whatever means available to them. A 55 year old Cape Verdean woman, the oldest child in her family, had dropped out of high school in her native country so that she could go to work. By doing so, she provided the additional family income needed to send her younger brothers and sisters to elementary school. She explained how this decision was made:

Well I finished primary school, but I only went to secondary for two years because we were at that time seven kids, and my father couldn't afford to do it. I didn't finish school because of all the kids. My parents wanted all of us to have at least a primary school education.

So I had to get up very early to help my mother and then go off to my job. It was very hard to get even a primary school education at that time in Cape Verde, especially for women. We actually got more education than most others, thanks to my parents. And some of my brothers and sisters have even more education than me because they were younger, and so this way they had the chance to go.

This woman was never able to return to school to complete her secondary education; however, all of her brothers and sisters completed elementary school, and several of them completed high school.

### Being Suspended from School

At the time she dropped out of high school, a 22 year old Irish American woman had been suspended from school multiple times and was in danger of expulsion. This woman's account shows most clearly how family crises and the trauma of abuse and neglect can create insurmountable problems that lead to dropping out of school. This woman, who was neither required nor encouraged to attend school, described the most negative early schooling experiences of any woman who participated in the study. She outlined in detail the circumstances and events that led to her decision to drop out. When asked to describe or explain her first memory of school, she replied:

My first memory of school was kindergarten. I was in the school yard. I was crying on the fire escape and waiting for my father to come pick me up. My earliest memory of school would be when I went back to school and everybody was making fun of me because my mother had died, and they were taunting me because they said she killed herself because she didn't want me and my bother anymore.

This woman's mother had committed suicide when she was five years old and her brother was sixteen. Her father took no interest in her schooling: "My father didn't even mention school. I just went. I could have missed years of school without my father ever noticing. He never went to a teacher's conference or a school play. Nothing." Because her father was an alcoholic, neglectful, and physically abusive, she was placed in her aunt and uncle's custody when she was eleven years old. She had this to say about the transition, its effects on her early schooling experiences, and her decision to drop out.

I attended 5th grade at [...], and then when I moved to my aunt and uncles [in a town outside Boston]. I had to repeat the 5th grade so that I wouldn't be in junior high without knowing anything. I had just moved, and it was alright for the most part, I wasn't really a good student, I was more the class clown trouble maker.

And everybody knew I lived with my aunt and uncle so they used to call me Little Orphan Annie. And that was my nickname up until high school.

So I was really a screwed up kid. And I was really angry all the time, and that made me not care. I wasn't listening to the teachers. I wasn't doing my homework. By the 7th grade I was skipping school and drinking every day. That started in 7th grade and went into 8th grade.

By 9th grade, I was suspended from school for having a liquor cabinet in my locker. I was not a good kid, a good teenager, because I was so angry. I had so many family problems that were never addressed.

I was supposed to be in 10th grade, but I didn't get enough credits, so I had to do 9th grade over. I started 9th grade again, but then I just stopped going. I gave up. And then I got pregnant.

I think if somebody had reached me earlier before I was eleven, maybe things would have, I would have had a more traditional upbringing, graduated from high school, but by the time my aunt and uncle got me, it was too late. They tried, I know they really tried, but it was just too late.

When asked if she remembered liking or disliking school she replied: "I hated it. I hated it because I didn't think that it ever meant anything." When asked if she had ever found anything academically interesting or engaging about school she said:

No. Most of the teachers hated me. And most of the teachers, it felt to me like they didn't want to be there either. Like we were just a burden to them. They had a bad attitude. Like they were miserable teachers in a miserable job, their pay was low and the kids were horrible. And, yes, I agree, we were horrible.

When asked to reiterate her reasons for dropping out of school, she replied:

I was suspended too many times to go back. I was on the verge of expulsion, so I just dropped out completely instead. But it didn't matter anyway because it was rare that I ever went. I missed months at a time. But my aunt and uncle couldn't help that really because they worked till 6:00 at night, and I was on my own during the day. I came and went as I wanted. No one really had any control over me. So like I said, I just stopped going.

Because of family problems resulting from her mother's suicide and her father's alcoholism and abuse, this woman's early schooling experiences were very poorly integrated with family. Moreover, in contrast to women in the study who described positive early schooling

experiences, this woman did not identify a single teacher by name, nor did she indicate that any teacher had ever supported, encouraged, or inspired her in any way.

*To summarize*, thirteen of the women who participated in the study had dropped out of high school. Reasons given for dropping out ranged from pregnancy and marriage to academic difficulties and school suspension. However, about half of the women reported dropping out because of family problems. Many of the women who had dropped out expressed regret at having done so because they felt they were doing very well academically at the time, but they did not attribute their decisions in any way to broader social forces or institutional arrangements. On the other hand, most of the women also indicated that they felt they had no choice given their circumstances at the time.

#### Early Schooling: Summary and Discussion

This chapter has focused on the early schooling experiences of the women who participated in the study. Early schooling provided an important social context for the transmission of educational values, but was not a primary source of them. Positive early schooling experiences were associated with having been required and encouraged to attend school, being older than forty, having prior educational attainment of at least high school, and being Haitian, Cape Verdean, or African American. Women whose early schooling was well integrated with family and who recalled supportive teachers who had encouraged or inspired them in some way described the most positive early schooling experiences. Women whose early schooling was poorly integrated with family and who did not identify teachers who had supported, encouraged, or inspired them in any way described the most negative early schooling experiences.

Although the 22 year old Irish American woman above described the most negative early schooling experiences of any woman who participated in the study, she went on to successfully complete her adult education and literacy program, attain a GED, and enroll in community college. In spite of family tragedy, abuse, and upheaval, all of which negatively

affected her early schooling, this woman cultivated educational aspirations and expectations that supported her transition to college. Although as a set of institutional arrangements early schooling provided an important *social context* for the transmission of educational values, for the women in this study, early schooling was not a primary source of the transmission of these values.

For example, all of the women in the study cultivated high enough educational aspirations to enroll in adult education and literacy programs, and high enough educational expectations to express confidence in their ability to reach their academic goals, regardless of whether they described positive or negative early schooling experiences. Eight of these women successfully completed their adult education and literacy programs and transitioned to college. Of these eight women, four described at least some negative early schooling experiences, and two of these four described very negative early schooling experiences; the other four women described very positive early schooling experiences. However, for all of the women who participated in the study, what was more important than the quality of their early schooling experiences was the degree to which their early schooling was integrated with family. In other words, early schooling that was well integrated with family resulted in positive early schooling experiences; early schooling that was poorly integrated with family resulted in early schooling experiences that were generally negative.

The early schooling of the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women, all of whom were required and encouraged to attend school, was instrumental in *reinforcing* the explanatory frameworks that mothers and grandmothers used to convey the importance of education to them. Teachers who were perceived as competent and supportive, along with cooperative schooling practices that were well integrated with family, *facilitated* the transmission of educational values. In addition, women who described early schooling experiences were able to use their schooling for gaining general knowledge and for building academic and practical skills.

On the other hand, early schooling that was poorly integrated with family, conversely, worked against the transmission of educational values through family socialization processes. The negative schooling experiences of those Latina and Irish American women who were both required and encouraged to attend school were instrumental in *negating* the explanatory frameworks their mothers used to convey the importance of education to them. Learning disabilities that were undiagnosed, teachers who were not memorable, chronic academic difficulties that were not adequately addressed, insufficient help with homework, and contradictory messages about the priority of marriage and the fulfillment of domestic responsibilities to family over education *impeded* the transmission of educational values. In some cases, these issues made it impossible for women to develop their academic and practical skills through their early schooling.

Hence, for those women whose early schooling experiences were not well integrated with family, the institution of work became a source of the transmission of educational values, as it was for those women who were neither required nor encouraged to attend school, most of whom described negative early schooling experiences. Although not a primary transmitter of educational values, early schooling provided an institutional context for the potential development of academic abilities and social skills. However, as the early schooling experiences of the women in the study demonstrate, family crises and unresolved family conflicts sometimes shaped early schooling experiences in ways that, as noted above, made it impossible for some women to take advantage of educational opportunities. At the same time, for a number of the women who dropped out of high school, schools had failed to recognize their potential or to meet their academic needs. For many of these women, their first positive schooling experiences were in adult education and literacy programs.

## **CHAPTER 5: Work as a Transmitter of Educational Values**

This chapter addresses the second primary source of the transmission of educational values: the institution of work. I focus specifically on analyzing accounts of the work experiences of the women who participated in the study. As noted in Chapter 3, work experiences were particularly important for transmitting educational values to those women who were neither required nor encouraged to attend school because messages about the importance of education were, for the most part, not conveyed to them through their families. However, for those women who were both required and encouraged to attend school, work experiences were generally a secondary source of the transmission of these values, one that often supplemented and/or reinforced messages about the importance of education that were conveyed through family by their mothers and grandmothers.

The chapter focuses on explaining what the women learned about the importance of education, as well as about the organization of work, from their own work experiences and outlines how negative work experiences potentially created opportunities for practicing resistance and opportunities for engaging in the struggle to achieve a standpoint. I also discuss the women's understandings of the link between educational attainment and work opportunity and show how their understandings were historically shaped by both their work experiences and by the organization of work in the newly restructured economy.

### **THE LINK BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND WORK OPPORTUNITY**

An important social process that transmitted educational values to the women who participated in the study was communication of the message that 1) work was and would continue to be necessary and 2) the higher one's educational attainment, the greater the work opportunities one would encounter. In some cases this message was communicated directly by mothers and grandmothers in the process of offering broader explanations of why education was important (e.g. the "educational attainment/work opportunity" narrative

used by Latina and Irish American mothers), but more often the women learned about the link between education and work either from their own work experience and/or, vicariously, from their observations of the work experiences of family members, friends, and/or co-workers. As one 28 year old Latina, one of the four women in the study who was neither required or encouraged to attend school, explained: "Well, I was working at CVS for minimum wage, and I figured out that the people with the good jobs had the good educations."

When these women made decisions about education, rather than focusing on an assessment of the perceived costs and benefits of education or on the probability of marketing educational credentials, they focused instead on the real costs of remaining employed in the lower-end segment of the labor market where they experienced labor exploitation. They learned from their work experiences, as did the Latina above, that a "good education" would provide, as one of the Irish American women put it: "a way out of nowhere." On the other hand, their negative work experiences also presented opportunities for critically assessing dominant cultural beliefs about the links between education and work—e.g., the belief that minimum educational requirements were necessarily grounded in the skill requirements of many jobs. As the women interrogated these beliefs, spaces were created for the potential practice of resistance and some of the women took advantage of these spaces to engage in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

All of the women who participated in the study spoke at some level about the connection between educational attainment and work opportunities, and many women articulated their educational aspirations within broader discussions of their occupational and/or professional goals and interests. When asked why they had entered an adult education and literacy program, many of the women, like the Latina above, included reasons related to qualifying for a "good job." For example, a 47 year old African American woman answered the question thus:

Because I knew I had to have a high school diploma to get a good job or a better job. I knew I had to have that because most jobs, they want you to have a high school diploma, GED, or something.

Although these excerpts demonstrate a rather straight-forward understanding of a direct link between educational attainment and work opportunities, several women offered more contextualized accounts of past and present work experiences that had shown them the importance of education, and several women offered their own analyses of social arrangements and expectations when discussing the link between education and work. The following sections describe what the women learned about both educational requirements and the organization of work from their work experiences.

#### The Minimum Educational Requirement: A U.S. High School Diploma or GED

All of the women who participated in the study had held jobs and fifteen women reported long work histories. Most women specifically identified the U.S. high school diploma or GED as a necessary requirement for employment. In the accounts of older women, this requirement was described as a relatively recent development that had evolved over time. A 58 year old African American woman who had a long work history but was currently unemployed explained her experience thus:

I'm finding out now that if you just apply to McDonalds they want you to have a high school diploma. I've checked on some jobs at like McDonalds or Burger King, and if you don't have your diploma, they don't want to consider you. And they won't go on hearsay either, even if you've been out of school for thirty years, they say "bring it in." They want to see it.

A 39 year old Latina, who also had a long work history and was currently unemployed, offered her own analysis of this development:

Back in the day, if you were bagging groceries in the super market, they didn't care about the diploma. But now they want it everywhere. I went to Puerto Rico and applied for McDonalds, and they wanted a high school diploma!

Younger women in this group tended to accept the requirement of a high school diploma or GED as a given. A 20 year old Latina described her reasons for entering an adult education and literacy program: "Well, my daughter will be four next month, and I thought

what am I going to do for my daughter without a job, and I can't get a job without a GED." The understanding that work was a necessary means of providing for one's children, along with the understanding that a high school diploma or GED was a requirement for work, was a theme throughout these younger women's accounts. For example, a 31 year old Irish American woman offered a more contextualized account of the necessity of work, linking it to the broader social expectation of graduation from high school:

As an adult, society has built this model of what adult life should be, and adult life is supposed to be you graduated high school, you may have gone on to college or you may have not, but as an adult you are supposed to work.

And if you don't work you don't have money and you are dumb, and you are a loser, and you are a nobody. And being a parent you need to have a job to not only provide for your child and yourself, but you are also showing this child what adult life is like—you are modeling.

Although most of these women had not yet attained a high school diploma or GED, they learned from their own experience of searching for work, or, as in the case above, from their broader perceptions of the social expectations concerning work advanced by the dominant culture, that education was important because work was a social expectation and a high school diploma or GED had become a minimum requirement for obtaining employment. On the one hand, the Irish American woman above accepts the logics of these dominant understandings (e.g., she accepts responsibility for modeling work to her daughter); however, on the other hand, her account reflects her experience of social class oppression/subordination—i.e., ". . . if you don't work you don't have money and you are dumb , and you are a loser." This woman was clearly involved in the process of developing a critical consciousness that could inform the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

#### Marketing Skills Requires the Minimum Educational Requirement

In several cases, women who did not have a high school diploma or GED learned from their experiences in the labor market—either in searching for work or in seeking promotion with an employer—that without the minimum educational requirements their

skills were not recognized. Of the fifteen women who reported long work histories, six women had attained at least a high school diploma or GED and nine women had not.

### Immigrant Women

As one 46 year old Haitian woman explained when asked why she had enrolled in an adult education and literacy program: "Because everywhere you go they ask you for a high school diploma. And there are some things I am capable of doing, but because I don't have my high school diploma, I cannot apply for those jobs." This woman had attained a bachelor's degree in Haiti and had worked as a teacher there for almost ten years, but her educational credentials were not recognized in the United States. This was a common problem among the Cape Verdean women as well. Although one Cape Verdean woman had attained her high school diploma in Cape Verde and another a master's degree, they both learned from their work experience that although they had developed the skills required for better jobs, without attaining a U.S. high school diploma or GED, they would not be able to market these skills.

### Native Born Women

Native born women who reported long work histories but had not attained a high school diploma or GED faced a similar problem. Through work experience or training, they had often developed the necessary skills required for employment or promotion, but did not meet the minimum educational requirement of a high school diploma or GED. As one 59 year old African American woman explained when asked why she had enrolled in her adult education and literacy program: "Because every time you try to send out an application, even though I went to school for Microsoft and everything, that's the question they ask. You have to have the high school diploma or GED." The contextualized account of a 31 year old Latina's work experience in hospital food services follows:

Well this one [supervisor] said to me, "Why aren't you in another department. You know this job very well." And there were managers that were coming in, and I was training them. And I didn't know anything about math, but I was a whiz at being a

cashier. I knew how to count out my drawer at the end of the day, and I put together the bank deposits, and I knew what it all meant. So it's not like I didn't know how to deal with money, like doing the register; I knew that. But I just didn't know the math.

So, this [supervisor] was like, "You are really good at this; you could be an administrative assistant," because I was preparing food, managing other workers, and I knew all of it, but I also knew that they weren't going to promote me to another department because they were going to ask me where is your GED, where is your high school diploma, in another department. And I knew if they asked me I wasn't going to get the job.

This woman learned from her work experience that even though she had developed, and could demonstrate, the skills necessary for promotion, her lack of a high school diploma or GED severely limited her opportunities for advancement with her employer.

As these accounts demonstrate, minimum educational requirements were often being used as an artificial criteria for either keeping these women out of jobs altogether, or for paying them less than their skills warranted when they were hired. The Latina above concluded her description of her work experiences in hospital food services thus:

I think when it has to do with the *labor* [i.e., having the skills for the job], I don't think the diploma really matters. Meaning that, now they do; they want it. But back in the days, if you are bagging in the super market they didn't care because you don't need the diploma to be able to bag. But now they want it everywhere for every job whether you need it or not. I mean for the labor that is, to do the job.

Like many of the women who described their work experiences and what they had learned about the organization of work from them, this Latina identified discrepancies between the skills necessary to do a particular job and the minimum educational requirements of employers. Moreover, the discrepancies she identified indicated that she was using her critical thinking skills to develop an assessment of the veracity of the direct link between educational attainment and greater work opportunities.

As the discussion above reveals, several women in the study questioned the notion that employer's educational requirements were necessarily grounded in the need for more highly skilled workers. In doing so, these woman demonstrated the "power to disbelieve," which facilitated the development of a critical consciousness, one that was informed by what

they had learned from their work experiences about both the importance of education and the organization of work. In other words, their negative work experiences created potential spaces where they could begin to practice resistance and presented opportunities for engaging in the struggle of achieving a standpoint. Because of their experience of subordination, these women were in a position to exercise the "power of a free mind" to interrogate their work experiences and what they had learned from them toward the end of developing their own understandings, explanations, and causal attributions.

#### A College Degree Is Increasingly Necessary

Those women who reported long work histories who had attained a high school diploma or GED often learned from their work experience that a college degree was becoming increasingly necessary to retain employment. As a 42 year old African American woman replied when asked when she had first considered returning to school:

I would say the first time I considered returning to school was when I worked at the children's center, and there were college seniors coming in, and I felt threatened. My job felt threatened. And I decided I had better get out there and get some education to secure my job. I started to feel very insecure about my job because I knew a college degree was going to become necessary.

Although this woman had completed two years of college twelve years earlier, she enrolled in her adult education and literacy program to strengthen her academic skills with the intention of transitioning to college to complete her bachelor's degree. A 38 year old Irish American woman who wanted to own her own restaurant offered a similar rationale when asked why she wanted to attain an associate's degree: "Because when I go to borrow money to open up a restaurant, they will see that I have my degree, that I know what I'm doing, that I'm serious." Although these women had acquired the necessary skills to perform their duties, they learned through their work experience that the educational credentials required were often considered a signifier of competence and commitment. They also were aware that educational requirements were increasing over time. As a 60 year old Cape Verdean woman commented when asked what her dreams were for her children and

grandchildren: "Well, I want them to get the Ph.D. because the jobs continue to require more education. This makes the jobs harder to get because without education you can't meet the new requirements. The jobs in the future will require more and more education."

Equally important, most of the women in the study understood that the high school diploma or GED was not only important for increasing one's work opportunities, but also important for initially qualifying for admission to college. As the Haitian woman explained:

I know I need a better job, but my goal is to get my high school diploma and go where I need to go. Because without the high school diploma you cannot go to Roxbury Community College, you cannot go to UMass. You may be able to pass the Acuplacer test, you may have the skills, but they will not accept you.

It's just like with work. You may have the skills but they won't hire you. It's the first condition. You may have the money to pay for college, but you can't go without the high school diploma because they won't accept you.

These women had learned from their work experience that the development of skills alone was not enough to qualify them for either work opportunities or acceptance to college; they also needed to attain the minimum educational credentials required. Moreover, they understood this as a trend that would continue, making it increasingly necessary to attain higher levels of education in an effort to remain employable.

#### Lack of Minimum Educational Credentials Leads to Exploitation

Several women in the study learned of the importance of education through their work experience when they found that their lack of a high school diploma or GED left them open for labor market exploitation. Exploitation of labor, either through violation of state and federal minimum wage and/or wage payment laws, or by implying that a volunteer position would necessarily lead to paid employment when that was not the case, was a theme throughout these women's accounts of their work experience. As a 30 year old Cape Verdean woman explained:

I think a woman needs school because then she has her school and her work. I always say don't go only to work, go to school because if you have no school, they will only pay you \$2 or \$3 dollars an hour. But if you have school, you can earn much more and have a better future.

The inability to find a living wage job, and the necessity to work for substandard, if not sub-minimum, wages (or in a working situations where wages were illegally withheld altogether) was an issue identified by these women.

A 46 year old Haitian woman learned of the importance of education when she volunteered with an international non-profit organization that she had formerly worked for in Haiti. She was convinced that by volunteering she would receive assistance with her immigration status and, if her work was acceptable, would eventually be hired by the organization as a paid employee:

I went to the [organization] and volunteered for them. I volunteered for five years. I went there because I thought it would be a way for me to stay in the education field, and they said they could help me with my immigration. And also because I thought when you volunteered and there was a job opening, then you were hired for the job, but it wasn't that way for me.

This woman had enrolled in her adult education and literacy program because, as she said: "If you look at my resume you can see that I have worked as a sandwich maker, a cashier, a manager, but because I don't have my high school diploma, I feel I was abused because I didn't get the pay. They didn't pay me the salary I was supposed to have." Many of these women had been abused by employers who violated their worker's rights, and violated state and federal labor laws that were meant to protect them in the process of doing so.

A 59 year old African American woman volunteered at a local hospital for nine years. She identified this volunteer experience as one of the primary reasons she enrolled in her adult education and literacy program:

Well, I was volunteering five days a week in the volunteer office at the hospital, and I was doing everything that the paid employees were getting paid to do, but yet still they looked over me.

I was a volunteer organizing volunteers. I had implemented changes in office procedures; I had run the office by myself with nobody else there. And when one of the other volunteers became a citizen, I thought, I don't know what she is going to do, but I need to find me something. So, I came back to school.

Although this woman was performing all of the duties that would be required of a paid employee and had expressed her interest in a paid position after years of volunteering, she was never hired. Low pay, inflexible hours, poor working conditions, and working for employers who routinely violated state and federal labor laws were common characteristics of the work experience of these women. Indeed, twelve of the fifteen women who had acquired long work histories reported multiple forms of labor exploitation in their accounts of their educational life histories.

The experience of labor exploitation was one of the principle social mechanisms through which spaces for the potential practice of resistance were created. These women fully understood that they were being abused and exploited by employers, which was one of the primary reasons they placed such a high value on education in the first place—why they understood education as "a way out of nowhere." Whereas few women's accounts of their educational life histories indicated the development of a critical consciousness in relationship to their early schooling experiences, almost all of the women who participated in the study used their later experiences of labor exploitation to take advantage of opportunities this exploitation presented for engaging in the process of achieving a standpoint. These educationally disadvantaged women understood that they were being exploited not only as individual workers, but as members of oppressed/subordinated groups.

#### Limited English Language Skills Decrease Work Opportunities

*Haitian and Cape Verdean women.* In addition to the frequent experience of labor exploitation, the Haitian and Cape Verdean women stressed that limited English language skills had been one of their greatest obstacles to employment or promotion. Although the Haitian and Cape Verdean women were clearly concerned with language skills acquisition, for this group of Haitian and Cape Verdean women, what they learned more generally about the connections between educational credentials and work opportunities grew into more specific concerns as they became increasingly aware of the connection's importance to also

developing their English language skills in the context of their orientations to the labor market. They learned that education was important in several interconnected ways: for developing English language skills, including developing their literacy skills; for meeting the minimum educational requirements of employers (i.e., attaining a U.S. high school diploma or GED); and for accessing the educational services they needed to accomplish both. In other words the latter was often contingent on the former.

For example, when asked if she had anticipated English being required in the workplace, a 55 year old Cape Verdean woman who had been in the United States for twenty years replied: "Oh yes, they told me that the first thing is the language. You have to learn the language." All of these women established that developing their skills with English so that they could get a "better job" was one of their primary reasons for enrolling in an adult education and literacy program. For these women a "better job" meant a job where they would be paid a legal wage and treated with dignity and respect by employers—a job where they would not be exploited.

Although women who were native speakers of English also wanted to develop their literacy skills, language development as a contingency for work was, understandably, more central to the employment issues of the immigrant women. As a 39 year old Cape Verdean woman described her *atypical* experience with language and work:

Actually when I came to the United States eighteen years ago I was *very lucky*. I met a guy, and he had just graduated from college. He had just started his business [in food services], and he lived on the fourth floor; his business was on the first floor. So every day he kept talking to me, asking me my name, asking where I came from. And he realized I didn't speak English, but he had a little Spanish, so we started communicating because I have Portuguese.

And he told me he had graduated and started a business, and he asked me if I wanted to come and work for him, and I said "sure." So I started working for him, and he's American. So that was how it was for me. I was in an American work environment, so I had to learn English, and he helped me. That was a good start for me because I worked for him for twelve years, and I made good money.

Although this woman's experience, was, as noted above, atypical, she was well aware of this fact and considered herself "very lucky" relative to what she had learned from both hearing about and observing the experiences of other immigrant women like herself. After twelve years of service, this woman was laid off of her job as a food services worker. When asked why she thought she had been laid off, she explained:

Because I wasn't educated; that's what I think. Because I worked for him for over a decade. There were four of us who helped him from the beginning. But when he got things really going, he wanted to get educated people.

But I was lucky when I came to the United States too, because someone like me—I didn't even have a high school diploma then. And even though I was pretty upset with him at the time, I was still lucky.

This woman's account reflects how, for immigrant women, work experience is integrated with the acknowledged necessity of developing English language skills, including literacy. Through this social process, the Haitian and Cape Verdean women learned of the importance of education, establishing a direct link between developing higher levels of English proficiency and greater work opportunities. They also learned that developing their English language skills would afford them opportunities to protect themselves from the most unscrupulous employers as well as to more fully participate in the social-cultural activities of neighboring communities that were predominantly English-speaking.

#### Bilingual Language Skills Increase Work Opportunities

*Latina and Irish American women.* Although the Latinas learned from their work experience that there was a direct connection between educational credentials, language acquisition, and greater work opportunities, these Latinas were more likely to consider how they might market their advanced bilingual language skills as interpreters in the workplace as they achieved higher levels of educational attainment. In other words, for the six Latinas who participated in the study, English language acquisition was not a significant challenge. All of these women were bilingual in Spanish and English at advanced levels. Although Spanish was the first language of all of these Latinas, all but one had learned English as a

small child. Several of these women did, however, indicate that they understood the necessity of developing their English literacy skills, including one Puerto Rican/Cuban woman who had been attending community college for two years. In addition, one of the Irish American women also was bilingual in English and Spanish, a requirement of her current employment. This woman had studied Spanish in high school and had since used it frequently. Each of these women mentioned their bilingual language skills and potential to market their bilingual skills as interpreters when they discussed their occupational interests and/or goals. Notwithstanding their higher level of English proficiency, what all of these women learned is that education is important because there is a direct link between educational attainment and work opportunities that intersects with language acquisition at different levels of language proficiency and literacy.

#### Socio-Economic Contexts: Global Economic Restructuring and Flexible Employment

As noted above, most of the women who participated in the study had acquired long work histories and many of their mothers and grandmothers had done so as well, often with limited educational credentials or qualifications, if any at all. All of these women understood that they needed to work to provide for themselves and their families. The women who participated in the study learned that there was a direct connection between educational attainment and work opportunity from explanatory frameworks conveyed through family narratives, as well as through their own work experiences. In general, what the women learned from these work experiences was informed by a broader socio-economic context, one integrated with the social histories of gender and racial/ethnic oppression/subordination outlined in the previous chapter. Following is a very brief description of this broader socio-economic context.

The decades of the 1970s and 1980s ushered in unprecedented changes in the U.S. economy. By the end of the latter decade, the declining profitability of labor-intensive manufacturing had inspired a massive structural transformation away from an industrial-

centered economy toward one that remains information, service, and finance-oriented. Nearly 40 percent of U.S. manufacturing jobs were lost to globalization throughout this period. Over 70 percent of the jobs created to take their place were located in the service sector where the average wage was and remains half that of manufacturing (Bluestone and Harrison 1982). Most importantly, 60 percent of these “new” jobs went to women, “reflecting both the increase in women’s labor force participation and the disproportionate increase in service industries and in occupations where significant number of women are employed” (Kuhn and Bluestone 1987:9). Finally, in this newly restructured economy employment rates through temporary agencies tripled overall employment rates, and almost 70 percent of these temporary workers were women (Amott 1993; Callaghan and Hartmann 1991; Reskin and Padavic 1994). Today, success in this new economy often hinges on the extent to which corporations can introduce into all sectors of the economy innovative technologies to formulate and integrate ideas for moving, processing, or generating information. In 1950, 60 percent of jobs could use unskilled labor; by 2000, 50 years later, only 15 percent could do so (Robinson 2000).

Because of the organization of this newly structured economy, most educationally disadvantaged women compete for wage-producing work in labor markets that are structured very differently and are often much more uncertain than those available to those who are more highly skilled. This uncertainty is the result of labor markets that have become increasingly more flexible and insecure. In addition to paying low wages and offering few benefits, forms of flexible employment are often characterized by high levels of casualization—work that is temporary, seasonal, part-time, and/or contingent. Furthermore, casualization is often concentrated in sales, service, and clerical industries, industries which have historically employed large numbers of low-skilled women (Amott, 1993). As McCall (2001) concluded from her analysis of growing inequality in the context of this new economy:

Gender inequality tends to increase among the least-educated in casualized labor markets as well as in labor markets with high joblessness. . . . Low-skilled women in particular are among the most vulnerable to new and deepening forms of flexibility and insecurity. (P. 137)

Flexible labor markets are also characterized by high levels of competition, which, in combination with casualization, tends to depress wages, particularly among women as they have been historically situated toward the very lowest end of the wage distribution. In general, earnings and working conditions for college educated workers have improved, while those of low-skilled workers have deteriorated; the wage gap between these two groups of workers has appreciably widened throughout the last several decades (Pandey et al. 2000; Brand 2000).

However, as noted in the introduction, there is little agreement about what the impact of the increase in jobs that require more highly-skilled workers means for the productivity of the U.S. economy. On the other hand, as the accounts of the work experiences of the women who participated in this study show, the economic restructuring of the new economy has had a significant impact on both their work experiences and work opportunities, as well as their educational aspirations and expectations. For example, those women who learned from their work experiences that skills acquisition, although necessary, was not a sufficient preparation for employment or promotion were encountering particular institutional arrangements in the organization of work that were not directly related to skills deficits on their part. As the account of the Latina who had developed the skills necessary to perform her duties as a cashier revealed, without the minimum educational requirement of a high school diploma or GED, she was not going to "get the job" even though she demonstrated the skills necessary for promotion.

Although educationally disadvantaged women do lack the skills necessary for many positions in the newly restructured economy with its emphasis on generating ideas and processing information, their work experiences are shaped by employment practices that

tend toward devaluing the skills that they have developed. As Jackson and Slade (2008) argue in their institutional ethnography of discourses of illiteracy in a workplace where workers' skills were "systematically undervalued and unrewarded":

How these workers functioned, however, turned out to have little to do with individual skills or skill deficits. Instead, it was part of an organizational course of action in which some workers (and not others) were hired into temporary and subordinate positions and then excluded from key literacy practices. (P. 36)

In other words, although educationally disadvantaged women certainly do need to develop their skills and earn educational credentials to prepare for better-paying, more rewarding jobs, the new economy has been organized around high-performance principles aimed at "increasing productivity through more intensive management of both material and human resources" (p. 29), principles that generally work against the interests of workers, particularly those who are lower-skilled.

Moreover, this management approach is often grounded in employment practices that systematically reinforce gender, age, race/ethnicity, and/or social class subordination (McCall 2001; DeVault 2008). It is this new economy that has provided the broader socio-economic context for the work experiences of the women who participated in the study and what they learned about both the importance of education and the organization of work from them. What educationally disadvantaged women have learned from working in this new economy is that they need to develop their skills and attain as much education as possible in an effort to avoid continued subordination and exploitation by employers. Hence, for these women, the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations became a strategy of resistance: Increasing levels of educational attainment increased their chances of resisting interrelated forms of gender, racial/ethnic, and/or social class subordination that have increased with the reorganization of work in this newly restructured economy. Within this specific socio-historical context, these educationally disadvantaged women were presented with opportunities for creating spaces where they could actively resist this

subordination/exploitation, develop the critical consciousness necessary for challenging existing these social arrangements, and potentially engage in the struggle to achieve a standpoint. As this analysis has demonstrated, many of the women who participated in this study were in the process of taking full advantage of these opportunities.

#### Work as a Transmitter of Educational Values: Summary and Discussion

This chapter has focused on explaining how the importance of education was conveyed to the women who participated in the study through the institution of work. primarily through their own work experiences. These women learned that work was necessary and that there were minimum educational requirements that had to be met for both employment and for accessing greater work opportunities. In addition, they learned that these requirements were increasing over time. In other words, they learned that skills acquisition, although necessary, was not a sufficient preparation for employment or promotion—at least the minimum level of educational attainment required for the job, often expressed as a distinct educational credential, was necessary as well.

Moreover, these women learned from their work experiences that not meeting minimum educational requirements often channeled them away from legitimate employers and left them open for labor exploitation when they did work. Finally, they learned that in the United States, English language acquisition and literacy are particularly important skills that must be continually developed to access both education at increasingly higher levels of attainment and work at increasingly higher levels of specialization. Hence, we have the transmission of educational values through the institution of work: Through their own work experiences, women learn that education is important because it is directly connected to greater work opportunities. Most of the women who participated in the study attributed their negative work experiences and confinement to low paying jobs in the service sector to the fact that they didn't have the educational credentials required to qualify for better jobs.

However, their accounts of their work experiences also show how work is organized to exclude them even when they have the skills to perform these jobs.

Although they understood that there was a direct link between educational attainment and greater work opportunities, most of the women who participated in the study also articulated the awareness that their negative work experiences could be attributed to employers' willingness to exploit them and often had little or nothing to do with their lack of skills and/or their lack of proficiency in English. For those women who were both required and encouraged to attend school, what they learned from their negative work experiences reinforced what many had learned from their mothers and grandmothers about the importance of education and its value as a vehicle for resisting multiple forms of oppression/subordination. For those women who were neither required nor encouraged to attend school, what they learned from their negative work experiences conveyed the importance of education by demonstrating the link between educational attainment and work opportunity; however, these women also valued education as a means to escape the labor exploitation to which they had been subjected at the lowest ends of the lower-skilled, low-wage labor market.

With the exceptions identified in the chapter, most of the women who participated in the study accepted the notion that minimum educational requirements were linked to labor market needs for more highly skilled workers; however, the cost-benefit calculations these women made to assess the value of educational credentials in the labor market were based, not on their perception of labor market needs, but on their negative working experiences. When these women made decisions about education, rather than focusing on an assessment of the perceived costs and benefits of education or on the probability of marketing educational credentials, they focused instead on the real costs of remaining employed in the lower-end segment of the labor market versus the benefits of getting out of it any way they could. Ironically, irregular and arbitrary working schedules often imposed by employers was

one of the greatest barriers to the women's ability to participate in adult education and literacy programs in an effort to increase their marketable skills. For most of the women who described labor market exploitation, their only recourse was to resist this exploitation by quitting their jobs, which these women often did. In doing so, these women were actively engaged in the struggle to achieve a standpoint. Of the fifteen women in the study who had established long work histories, six reported having worked at mostly "good jobs" throughout most of their working years; alternatively, nine of these women indicated that they had cycled in and out of low-paying jobs where they had negative work experiences. The five women who had not established long work histories reported having held one or two low-paying jobs that they would not want to return to.

The women who participated in this study learned from their work experiences, as did the Latina who was working at CVS for minimum wage, that having the "good jobs" meant having the "good educations," but they also learned, like the Latina quoted in the introduction, that having these good jobs was as much about being given "meaningful choices" concerning work as it was about developing skills and attaining educational credentials. As Randal Collins (1979) argued over three decades ago: "People without jobs (or with a succession of marginal positions) are without power over the main property resources of our society (and usually without political influence as well), and that is the reason they are poor" (p.55). For the women who participated in this study, being without power meant having few if any viable employment options. Educational values were transmitted through work experiences not only because the women recognized the direct link between educational attainment and greater work opportunities, but also because they recognized the direct link between greater work opportunities and greater power—the right to the legitimate exercise of a measure of control over one's work (i.e., labor), and a degree of autonomy in relationship to one's employers.

## CHAPTER 6: EXPERIENCES IN ADULT EDUCATION AND LITERACY PROGRAMS

This chapter addresses the later schooling experiences of the women who participated in the study—their experiences in adult education and literacy programs. Whereas early schooling experiences (See Chapter 4) provided an important social context for the transmission of educational values, later schooling experiences in adult education and literacy programs provided an important social context for the translation of these educational values into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. The first section of the chapter focuses on describing the women's reasons for returning to school and provides an analysis of their experiences in their adult education and literacy programs. The second section of the chapter explains how educational values are translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations in the context of schooling in adult education and literacy programs. This section also addresses how the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations created potential spaces for the active practice of resistance. As the women further developed their capacity for critical examination of their past and present schooling experiences, as well as the organization of their gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination, they encountered opportunities for engaging in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

All of the women who participated in the study reported very positive schooling experiences in their adult education and literacy programs. This held true across lines of age, race/ethnicity, and social class. For these women, early schooling experiences did not affect later experiences in adult education and literacy programs: The women who described positive early schooling experiences in elementary school and high school, congruently, described positive schooling experiences in their current adult education and literacy programs. However, the women who described *negative* early schooling experiences, conversely, described positive schooling experiences in their current adult education and literacy programs.

## RETURNING TO SCHOOL

The thirteen women who had dropped out of high school entered their adult education and literacy programs to attain a U.S. school diploma or GED. The seven women who had already attained *at least* a U.S. high school diploma, or the equivalent credential from their native countries, entered their adult education and literacy programs to strengthen their academic skills and/or to develop their English language skills. On average, the women who participated in the study attended at least two adult education and literacy programs before they enrolled in their current program or the program from which they had graduated, and four of the women had completed vocational training programs prior to enrolling in their current adult education and literacy program.

### Finding the "Right Program" at the "Right Time"

Most of the women who had dropped out of high school indicated that they had always intended to return to school to attain a high school diploma or GED, although life circumstances, particularly child care responsibilities, and/or fear of failure often delayed their enrollment. Irregular working hours (e.g., arbitrary changes in scheduling) and generally uncooperative (if not abusive) employers were other barriers to enrollment. Women searched for programs that would meet their academic needs (i.e., the "right program") during times when they could arrange for adequate child care, when they were out of work, or when the parameters of their employment would accommodate returning to school (i.e., at the "right time"). However, academic difficulties often forced them to drop out again even after returning. For most of the women, these barriers overlapped.

A 58 year old African American woman had enrolled in her first adult education and literacy program ten years before entering her current program. She eventually dropped out of that first program before completing it. She described the circumstances thus:

Well, I've always wanted to get my high school diploma ever since I dropped out of high school to get married. I actually returned ten years ago. I was in this private program to get the GED. And then my baby, my son, was six or seven at the time.

And I had gone there at least three or four months, and I was supposed to take the test. And then my son got sick, so I dropped out again. I was still motivated, but it became overwhelming. And then I was really just so mad at myself.

About five years later, this woman investigated a computer training program offered through a national non-profit organization, which eventually led to her enrollment in her current program:

But then after that, about five years later. Well, let's say how I got motivated to come here, I went to a training program because I didn't know anything about computers. And a woman there said I should consider going back to school, and I was mad about it because I just wanted the computer training. And then I thought about it more, and I decided, "Yea, why shouldn't I go back now. I've always wanted to do it; why not try it again now."

So I enrolled in [my second adult education and literacy program], and I learned how to operate computers there. And I did a lot of other work over there too. It was another GED program, and I was having trouble with the math, and the director thought I had gone as far as I could over there. So he sent me over here.

I've been here now for about four years. I'm almost finished. But it's still the math. I'm working on the math now. It's a struggle, but once I get this math task done, I'll graduate with my adult high school diploma this spring.

This woman's experience was typical. A number of women found it necessary to drop out of earlier adult education and literacy programs because of family circumstances, particularly child care responsibilities. And many also described academic difficulties, often with math and algebra, that led them to try several different programs in an attempt to find the "right program" at the "right time" for them.

For several women who had dropped out of high school, but had always intended to return, it took several attempts for them to overcome their fear of failure. For example, a 61 year old African American woman entered two adult education and literacy programs before successfully completing her third:

Well, I always intended to get my GED. I enrolled in a GED program about a year after I dropped out of high school, but I never went back after signing up. And then when I was much older, I had all three of my kids by then, I enrolled in another GED program, and I finished that program.

But you know how you have to take the GED tests, and there were five tests. And I took the first four of them and passed. But then I just never would go back and take

that last test. It was English. And everyone that took that test before me would come back and say how hard that test was, and I got scared, and I wouldn't take it. I was too scared to take that test.

About five years later, this woman's niece recommended the adult education and literacy program she herself had been attending. After this woman's youngest child was in school for the full day, she enrolled in her third and final adult education and literacy program. She described the circumstances surrounding her return thus:

Well, I was forty-four by then. And I was saying to myself when this last kid gets into school full-time then I am going to do something for me. So I waited and waited, and then when he went to school for the full day, I came here [to the program my niece had recommended] and tried for a third time. But after I signed up, I almost didn't come back! I was still scared. I didn't know if I could do the work after being out of school for so long. But I stayed, and it worked for me.

Like many of the women in the study who had dropped out of high school, particularly those who had been out of school for a number of years before returning, this woman needed the "right program" at the "right time" to negotiate family responsibilities and overcome her fear of failure. This woman eventually graduated earning her adult high school diploma and went on to college.

#### Receiving Support and Encouragement

In addition to finding the "right program" for meeting academic needs, the women who had dropped out of earlier adult education and literacy programs before entering their current program emphasized that they were also looking for a program that would offer them the support and encouragement they needed. Equally important, they expected to be treated with dignity and respect, which had not always been the case in some of their earlier programs. A 20 year old Latina who had previously enrolled in a program that did not work out for her made the following comparison:

Well, I tried one other program, and I didn't like it at all. I was there for a month and then my appendix ruptured. And then I didn't go back for a month because I was in the hospital. So when I returned they wanted paperwork. And I didn't have my paperwork right then, so I showed the woman my stomach because she was very rude as if she thought I were lying.

I mean I had lost over 50 pounds. I left the program at 178 pounds and came back at 120 pounds. And I mean I could have taken the paperwork in, but when I realized what the attitude was, the lack of respect, I just said "forget it, this is not the place for me." So I never went back.

In contrast to this very negative experience, this woman reported a very positive experience in her current adult education and literacy program. When asked to describe this experience she said:

Oh, I like it here. I like it a lot. I think [the educational director] is the sweetest thing in the world. I think she really cares. Like if I walked in here with my whole side bandaged up, I don't think her first response would be "show me the paperwork!" And my daughter attends the Montessori school downstairs, and she has learned so much.

When asked about the expectations placed upon her by staff, she said: "Well, they just want you to try your best, and to get here, and then to do the best you can. They don't expect anything else. It's really great." She went on to explain why she thought the program was working out so well for her:

Like in this program they have support groups and you talk and all that. And I can tell [the educational director] something right now, and then she will hear everybody else's business, everybody else's problems, and she will remember exactly what I told her three weeks later!

So, you know when somebody can do that they really care about you. And they have really supportive teachers here too, they do a really good job. And they don't judge you; they accept you for who you are.

For many of the women who participated in the study, the "right program" was as much about perceiving that they were being treated with dignity and respect, along with receiving the support and encouragement they needed, as it was about having their academic needs met. In addition, because this woman attended NFLP, which provides intensive counseling and educational services for children, as well as for mothers, conflicts with childcare responsibilities were minimized. Seven of the women who participated in the study were attending or had graduated from this program, and all reported that the availability of both counseling for themselves, and early childhood care and education for their children, had

been instrumental in their ability to continue and/or complete this adult education and literacy program.

### Overcoming Academic Difficulties

Women who described negative early schooling experiences often described negative experiences in adult education and literacy programs they had previously enrolled in prior to entering their current program—in most cases, the result of academic difficulties. Although many of these women encountered the same academic difficulties in their current adult education and literacy programs, they eventually managed to overcome them. A 39 year old Latina's experience was typical:

Soon after I dropped out of 10th grade, I tried to go to [an adult education and literacy program] for the GED. And again, I was getting everything else except the math. And I went to take, I paid \$40 twice to take, the GED test, and I failed it both times. And this is when you could take it all at once. And I went down there on a bus with everybody, sat in a classroom, and you were on your own. I took it twice. I failed it twice. And I just forgot about it.

This woman didn't attempt another adult education and literacy program for almost twenty years. She indicated that she had always wanted to do so, but financial obligations and family circumstances had prevented it. As was the case with a number of the women, negative work experiences prompted her to reconsider returning to school. When asked to describe her experiences in her current adult education and literacy program she elaborated:

I've met a lot of new people, and they've been friendly. The teachers are very supportive, very helpful. They want you to learn. They tell you, "don't say you can't do it; you can do it." They don't rush you. But they also want you to learn the skills that you need. In general, I'm very comfortable here. I don't feel like I'm being pressured.

Some people say you are going to be there for years and years, but I'm not in a rush. I'm okay. I feel that learning this way is easier for me, and my study skills have gotten better. And interacting with my teachers and other students who are trying to learn, I feel good about myself here. It's much better than when I was in high school. Much better.

For the women who had described negative early schooling experiences, having a much more positive experience in their current adult education and literacy program, both academically and socially, was the norm.

When asked where she got the support she needed to continue her education, a 22 year old Irish American woman who described the most negative early schooling experiences of any woman in the study had this to say about her experiences in her current adult education and literacy program:

Well, I definitely get it from [this program]. It's not something I expected to get from here, not as much as I've gotten. I never expected to get this much support. Like coming in here as compared to doing it all on my own for years. I was like "nobody is going to believe in me, I have to believe in myself." But now this is where I draw my strength from when I feel like my back is against the wall. I have a really good support system here in school. They always have my back here. And I love it.

And I love how if a certain teacher can't, it's like if their techniques—because all the teachers are great on the staff here—but if a certain teacher's techniques don't work for me, click in my head as it might for somebody else, there is always somebody else on the staff here that can help you. And like they bring in tutors if you need tutors. It's a great program.

All of the women who described negative early schooling experiences indicated that receiving the support and encouragement they needed to overcome academic difficulties was instrumental in helping them develop both the academic skills and self-confidence they needed to continue in their current programs.

#### Recovering from Substance Abuse

For several women in the study, substance abuse issues had previously inhibited their ability to successfully complete adult education and literacy programs, though they made multiple attempts to do so. For these women, participation in their current adult education and literacy programs was part of their plan of recovery. When asked to describe her experiences in her current adult education and literacy program, a 47 year old African American woman who had just completed her third drug abuse treatment program said that

she had tried "at least four or five" other adult education and literacy programs over the years:

Well, I've always wanted my diploma, and I would start a program and things would go well for a while and then I would just get all caught up in the life [of a heroin addict] again. I did this for over twenty years. And I always did well in the programs. I did very well with my studies. I would be making good progress, but then I would get caught up again and end up dropping out.

One of four women in the study who had struggled with serious substance abuse issues throughout their educational life histories, each of these four women had successfully completed a drug treatment program prior to entering their current adult education and literacy program. This woman indicated that she had very positive experiences, not only in her current program, but in earlier programs as well:

Well, I came here because I needed to continue my education. I wasn't really scared; I was just a little nervous. Because I was around new people. I had just left another program because it was just two days a week, and I needed something consistent every day, Monday through Friday. So I came here.

And yes, I was a little nervous about getting to know new people. And this was a bigger program, more students, than I'd ever attended before. But my older sister graduated from here, and she had a very positive experience. And it's been a very good experience for me too. More positive than my experience in other programs because I was ready. I was ready. I was ready when I started my other programs too, but I just got caught up [in the drugs].

As was the case for this woman, entering an adult education and literacy program was part of the plan of recovery for these women, each of whom attributed their success to the fact that they were now "ready" to focus on their schooling because they were now in recovery.

### Developing English Language Skills

Regardless of their level of prior educational attainment, the Haitian and Cape Verdean women enrolled in their adult education and literacy programs to develop their English language skills and earn a U.S. high school diploma. A 30 year old Cape Verdean woman had this to say about her experiences in her adult education and literacy program:

English is the biggest problem. I have no problem with math. But I need my U.S. high school diploma. And even though this is all review for me, with the math, I have to pass the MCAS. And the MCAS is all in English. I took my math assessment test

on the computer here and the highest score is 700, and I scored 690. So my teacher said, you don't have to come to math class anymore.

But the test is all in English, that is the problem. All the instructions on the MCAS math test, everything is in English. And, of course, I have to take the MCAS reading and writing test too—again, all in English. Of course my English has improved a great deal, but I don't know that it's good enough to pass the tests.

So, I am focusing on my English. I practice all the time. At our house, my cousin has a baby, and I talk to the baby in English. No one else in my house speaks English. They speak Cape Verdean Creole or sometimes Portuguese, but they have no English. And my cousin is very happy with me because her baby will be bilingual!

A 26 year old Cape Verdean woman replied when asked what had been most helpful to her in her adult education and literacy program:

Well I came here to improve my English. And I could see when I came to the United States two years ago that it was not going to be easy. But I'm here in the program now, and I can understand much better. And I've been given a lot of support and encouragement. I need more reading, reading out loud is the most important for me.

Because I studied English in Cape Verde, but I studied technical English. We learned the basics: asking your name, numbers, and the conversations you might have in a store or in a bank. You learn a lot of vocabulary and grammar, but the problem is the pronunciation; it's totally different.

Some things are the same, but much is totally different depending on the speaker. When I was in one class here I could understand the teacher very well. But when I got promoted to another class, I couldn't understand the teacher at all. But they were both speaking English; it just sounded different.

Like the women above, most of the Cape Verdean women focused on their experiences with English language acquisition and the development of literacy skills when asked about their experiences in their current adult education and literacy programs. As a 30 year old Cape Verdean woman explained: "Everything here is in English and that's good because this is why I am here. To get better at English and to earn a U.S. high school diploma. And there are many other Cape Verdean students here too, and this helps." All of the Cape Verdean women attributed part of the reason for their positive schooling experiences in their current adult education and literacy programs to the fact that many of their classmates were Cape Verdean as well and, therefore, knew their language and their culture.

### Strengthening Academic Skills

Two Irish American women had attained their high school diplomas before enrolling in their current adult education and literacy programs. In addition, an African American woman had attained her high school diploma, completed two years of college, and then dropped out. These women enrolled in their adult education and literacy programs to strengthen their academic skills. The 42 year old African American woman's goal was to prepare for returning to college to complete her bachelor's degree. When asked about how her program was helping her reach this goal she responded:

Well, when I dropped out of college the thought of returning to school never left my mind. But when I took the locator test I was at the beginning secondary level, so I had a lot of work to do. I didn't really think I needed a lot of prerequisite work, but I knew my skills were rusty. So I did some essays, some math, and some computer, and all of it helped me a lot.

I've now taken the Acuplacer test, and it indicated that I'm working at the college level. And I like working in the classroom setting. And I feel fortunate that I came here because this program is five days a week. And I like it here also because there is a lot of diversity. Not just that it is coeducational, but that there are older students and younger students, students from other countries. I like this.

And I feel that the students are doing really well here. I also like being involved in the student council here because it helped me develop leadership skills. And it felt good to represent the school.

*I was also addressing the old me, the girl who was afraid to go back to school. So at first I thought that I couldn't do it, but I decided I needed to do it. And that's what student leadership has been like for me. I'm ready to return to college now and finish my degree.*

As the account of the woman above reveals, taking advantage of opportunities to develop leadership skills was another way of increasing self-confidence and facilitating the return to school. Although all of the women who participated in the study enrolled in their adult education and literacy programs with the intention of strengthen their academic skills, this was particularly important for the women who had previously attained their high school diplomas. Moreover, most of these women were in the process of cultivating educational

aspirations for attending college even before they entered their current adult education and literacy programs.

#### TRANSLATING EDUCATIONAL VALUES INTO EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

This second section of the chapter explains how educational values that are transmitted through the institutions of family and work are translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations in the context of adult education and literacy programs. Based on an analysis of their experiences in their adult education and literacy programs, for the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study, educational values were translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations through three overlapping social processes: 1) acquiring self-confidence, 2) achieving and maintaining independence, and 3) accepting family responsibility. In addition, these social processes created spaces for practicing resistance to gender, age, racial/ethnic, and/or social class subordination. As the women developed their critical and analytical thinking skills in their adult education and literacy programs, their capacities for developing a critical consciousness grounded in their knowledge of their experience of oppression increased, and they were presented with opportunities for engaging in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

##### Acquiring Self-Confidence

Acquiring self-confidence was an important social process for translating educational values into educational aspirations and expectations among the women who participated in the study. Although, as noted in the first section, all of the women projected a very high level of self-confidence in their potential to fulfill their educational aspirations at the level at which they articulated them—reflected in their high expectations of their potential for reaching their educational and occupational goals—their acquisition of self-confidence was expressed more generally as a firm belief in their competence, not only academically, but socially and occupationally/professionally as well. Through the process of acquiring self-

confidence over time, these women were able to translate the educational values that had been transmitted to them through their families and their work experiences into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. They were also able to use the self-confidence they had acquired to develop a critical consciousness through which they could resist subordination. Indeed, for many of the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in the study, cultivating educational aspirations and expectations was part of the process of struggling to achieve a standpoint.

When asked if she had encountered any obstacles in returning to school, a 60 year old, middle-class Cape Verdean woman focused on both her academic and professional competence: "No, because I am very organized. . . . I can remember many things at once. It can be twenty things, and I do not need to be reminded. I can say I need to do this, and this, and this and get it all done. . . . I am a very methodical person." When asked what her experience in her adult education and literacy program had been, this woman replied: "Well, I learned how to speak English well and how to work in the United States as an assistant administrator because in my country I was a manager, and I coordinated everything." For the Haitian and Cape Verdean women the process of acquiring English language skills often provided a broader sense of competence that translated into educational aspirations. The following from a 46 year old Haitian woman who had been in the United States for ten years:

My command of English is much better now. First of all, I am more confident to communicate with others. Second, I am more confident to write, and my listening skills are much better, and my comprehension in reading is much better. So I can say right now that I'm ready after my high school graduation to go on to college.

The Haitian and Cape Verdean women all identified English language acquisition as their greatest academic challenge; likewise, all reflected an increase in self-confidence as they developed their language skills over time through participation in their adult education and

literacy programs and, for those women who had transitioned to college, through further education.

Some women acquired self-confidence through the cultivation of their social and/or occupational/professional skills. For example, a 28 year old Latina who was asked about her experience in her adult education and literacy program described how her experiences had helped her develop her social skills and, subsequently, cultivate educational aspirations for college:

Well, this is a wonderful experience. It's like a total transformation. When I started here I was depressed, and I had to read out loud, and like I said, I was shy, and I had to speak up. But I've opened up a lot since then. I mean I wasn't even thinking about college; that wasn't even in my thoughts. I thought I am just coming to get my GED. And now I've been [in community college] for two years. I'm a whole different person now.

Other women acquired self-confidence directly through their work experiences as they developed their occupational and/or professional skills. When asked if she had ever done any nursing, a 39 year old Cape Verdean woman who aspired to a bachelor's degree in the field replied:

I think I will do great in the nursing field! The reason is that back home [in Cape Verde] I used to work at the Red Cross. After I had my baby, my husband's friend was high up in the Red Cross, and he helped me find a job there. And I used to cook, and be in the dining room. I worked there for five years before I came to the United States, and I found out that I am very, very good with people.

This woman's comment was typical of those women who had drawn on work experience to establish occupational/professional goals. Most of the women in the study who had long work histories had acquired self-confidence in their occupational/professional competence, and this self-confidence was then translated into educational aspirations and expectations. A

42 year old African American woman described her work experience thus:

They encouraged me to move ahead at the day care center by taking courses, etc. And then I started looking at it as a career and not just a job because I enjoyed it that much. After I left [college], I realized I liked working with families, I liked working with children. And that's when I decided I wanted to teach others along the way. Guide them. And I was good at it. The parents were always sad to see me go,

to move on. Because I feel I made a lot of differences for those families. So, this is how I found my calling.

This woman aspired to returning to college to finish her bachelor's degree in human services or a related field. Her occupational/professional goal was to direct her own family center for providing services to teenage mothers and their children.

Hence, the acquisition of self-confidence—through academic achievement, through English language acquisition, and/or through the development of social skills and/or professional/occupational skills—was an important social process through which these women established a general sense of their competence. As these women participated in their adult education and literacy programs, their self-confidence increased over time. As they acquired higher levels of self-confidence in their skills and abilities, the educational values that had been transmitted to them through their families and their work experiences were translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations.

Acquiring self-confidence also provided an important foundation for developing critical and analytical skills and for cultivating a critical consciousness. Analysis of the women's experiences in their adult education and literacy programs indicated that as they became more confident in their social and academic abilities, they also became more confident in their ability to assess their own needs, and as they developed more trust in their judgment to make decisions that were in their own best interest, they became less likely to uncritically accept the understandings promoted by the dominant culture. Although the women who participated in the study generally accepted the dominant cultural belief in education as the great equalizer—the primary means for ameliorating poverty and inequality—the self-confidence they acquired in their adult education and literacy programs facilitated their willingness to interrogate social arrangements that were organized through systems of gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class stratification/subordination. As they confronted forms of oppression/subordination, potential spaces were created for practicing

resistance, and some women took advantage of these spaces for engaging in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

### Achieving and Maintaining Independence

Many of the women who participated in the study translated educational values into educational aspirations and expectations through both a desire and commitment to achieve and maintain independence in various forms. One of these forms centered on achieving and maintaining independence in relationship to male partners or husbands or, in some cases, adult children for whom they were still being held responsible. Educational values were translated into educational aspirations and expectations, more generally, in the process of achieving and maintaining independence in one's own thinking and decision-making processes—i.e., independent thinking. As women developed their independent thinking skills, they exercised the "power of a free mind" and the "power to disbelieve" toward the end of interrogating the logics underlying justifications for gender, age, racial/ethnic, and/or social class subordination, creating potential spaces for the practice of resistance.

*Male partners/husbands.* For example, a 30 year old Cape Verdean woman, who was single and had never been married, made the following comments about her reasons for aspiring to earn a U.S. high school diploma and then go on to graduate from college:

Yes, but I also fight for [education] because I want to work. My boyfriend does not want me to work, but only to go to school. And I think a woman needs her schooling and her work. This is why women need school and work: They may have a husband, but when they go to school and work, they are free and don't have to feel like they are in jail.

This woman's comments were framed within a broader sociopolitical context: As she explained, for many years most women in Cape Verde did not work outside the home; therefore, they were dependent on husbands to give them money to operate their family households. However, these arrangements had been changing over time. This woman described these changes thus:

In the past the men didn't want the women to work; the men only worked. A lot of women in Cape Verde didn't work, and sometimes they had several children with a man, and he didn't give them money. And if the woman's husband gave her money, she didn't care even if he had another woman. She wanted him to give her money for her home, to run her household and take care of her children.

But now women go to school and learn to take care of themselves. Now they can go to work and earn money to take care of themselves and their own families because they have schooling. So this is why I say there is change.

They [i.e., women] can do everything they want. If a man can buy a car, they can buy a car too. They aren't dependent on a man. They don't wait for a man. The husband gives you money, but the school gives you money later for your future work. This is what change means.

This woman translated the educational values transmitted to her by her mother, who had told her that "the school is your husband," into educational aspirations and expectations through her desire to achieve and maintain material independence in relationship to a male partner or husband. Although she planned to marry and have children at some point in her future, she was committed to doing so along with becoming materially self-sufficient in her own right.

Most of the women who participated in the study placed a very high value on achieving and maintaining this form of independence, which was reflected in the marital status of the sample. Table 6.1 below shows the marital status of each of the women who participated in the study by race/ethnicity. Thirteen of the women identified as "single."

Table 6.1—Marital Status by Race/Ethnicity

Marital Status	Race/Ethnicity				Totals
	Cape Verdean Haitian	African American	Latina	Irish American	
Married (living with husband)	2				2
Married (separated)	1	2	1	1	5
Single (divorced)	2	1			3
Single (widowed)		1			1
Single (never married)	1	1	5	2	9
Totals	6	5	6	3	20

Although three of these thirteen women were divorced from former husbands and one was a widow, the remainder of the single women (9)—almost half of those who participated in the study—had never been married. Only one of these (never-married) single women was cohabitating with a male partner; the other eight were living alone or with their children and/or with other family members. In other words, at the time their educational life histories were recorded, twelve of the thirteen single women were not involved in live-in relationships with men.

Moreover, of the seven married women who participated in the study, *only two were living with their husbands* at the time their educational life histories were recorded—the other five married women were living independently of their husbands for various reasons, indicating "separated" as their marital status on the brief questionnaire; however, none of these women indicated an intention to divorce. Although, in most cases, the reasons these women were living separately from their husbands were not clarified, the following was established: One African American woman's husband was living in a nursing home, another African American woman's husband was living out-of-state, the Haitian and Cape Verdean women's husbands were living in their native countries, the Latina's husband was living in Costa Rica, and the Irish American woman's husband was living "just a block down the street" from her. As she so succinctly put it: "We get along better that way."

Hence, of the twenty women who participated in the study, only three women were involved in live-in relationships with men—two women were living with their husbands, and one Latina (20 years old; the youngest woman in the study) was cohabitating with a male partner. Although none of the women who participated in the study expressed general negativity about marriage or having relationships with male partners (including those women who had been victims of male abuse), those women who did address the topic emphasized education as a way of establishing and maintaining a degree of independence in

their relationships with male partners or husbands. As argued in Chapter 5, these women understood that there is a direct link between educational attainment and greater work opportunities and that both would afford them more bargaining power in their relationships with men, particularly male partners or husbands, which enhanced the value of educational attainment for these women.

Interestingly, the two married women in the study who were living with their husbands, both Cape Verdean women, were the exception that proves the rule. Both women reported extremely egalitarian marriages with husbands sharing equally the full range of family responsibilities. One of the women had achieved her master's degree in economics in Cape Verde but was enrolled in her adult education and literacy program to develop her English language skills and attain a U.S. high school diploma. The other woman had attained her U.S. high school diploma and was attending community college to become a nurse; both women were working full-time as they continued their schooling. And both women described their marriages as "very happy."

As the analysis above demonstrates, these women were actively engaged in the process of resisting gender oppression/subordination as they cultivated educational aspirations and expectations. For these educationally disadvantaged women, cultivating educational aspirations and expectations was grounded in the desire to use educational attainment as a vehicle for achieving and maintaining a greater degree of independence in their relationships with male partners or husbands. Although it is generally argued that the reason low-income women avoid marriage is because the men they are most likely to marry are members of their own subordinated groups, therefore, have had less to contribute to a marriage/household as their economic prospects have progressively deteriorated in the new economy, the rationales that are reflected in the accounts of these educationally disadvantaged women indicate an equally important, if not more important, reason: These women understand that educational attainment can be used as a vehicle for achieving a

greater degree of independence, and educationally disadvantaged women take advantage of this opportunity to resist gender oppression/subordination in their relationships with male partners or husbands.

*Adult children.* Several of the older women who participated in the study expressed a desire for more independence in their relationships with their adult children. As a 58 year old African American widow of twenty years made clear when asked about her goals: "Well, marriage is one of my goals. I've been married once, and I want to get married again." However, at the same time, this woman went on to describe her broader commitment to finally putting her own needs ahead of those of others, particularly those of her family:

But I'm also learning to appreciate myself and to take care of myself and education is part of that—it's for me. As a matter of fact, I've raised ten kids. Seven of these were my own children, and three of these were my grandchildren. In fact, one of my grandchildren still lives with me.

This woman had come to a place in her life where education was part of the demand for a more independent life in general, which included dating, and potentially, remarriage:

I'm learning to spend more time on me. I was always so busy with the kids and helping everybody else, but now the time has come for me to do me. . . . And I have to say that finally some of my kids are starting to listen! And I say, "Yea, it's time for mom to have a life. If I want to date, let me date; if I want to travel, let me travel; if I want to do education, let me do education." I've done for them. And now it's my time to do for me.

Several women in the study, all African American women who had raised large families, expressed a desire for more independence in their relationships with their adult children. For these women, educational attainment was understood as a means for resisting the gendered values, beliefs, and expectations of both the dominant culture and their own subordinated racial/ethnic culture: These women were in the process of interrogating and challenging the notion that their children's needs, even as adults, should necessarily come ahead of their own.

*Thinking independently.* For other women, the desire and commitment to achieve and maintain independence was less directly related to potential partnership or

independence from adult children and more generally related to a belief in their right to think independently in their own interest and to act on these assessments, including, but not limited to, establishing their own educational goals and working towards achieving them even when this meant violating dominant cultural belief systems or the expectations of others in their own subordinated group. As a 60 year old Cape Verdean woman who had achieved her bachelor's degree explained:

Well, I had friends about my age who felt a little bit . . . they felt that I was too old to go to school. But myself, I feel good about it because I am a very hard-working woman. I try to get what I want, and I don't go to somebody else about this. I am a very independent woman. I want to follow my own plans. I don't like to . . . I follow my own plans for me, not somebody else's plans for me.

This Cape Verdean woman was in the process of actively resisting both gender and age subordination as she insisted on following her own courses of action. The younger women were no exception to this desire to make choices about one's life independently of the beliefs, values, and expectations of others.

As a 25 year old Latina replied when asked about her educational goals; that is, what level of education she hoped to achieve and why:

That depends. And I think it mostly depends on me. I don't like people to tell me what to do. I want to be my own boss. You know. But sometimes we have to go through that, let people tell you what to do to get what you want. I like to work with computers, and I know how to work with computers, and my goal is to get a job that I'm good at.

This young Latina was working toward earning her adult high school diploma, the one woman in the study who was actually discouraged as an adolescent from attending school by her mother. As was discussed in Chapter 3, several women were given enormous domestic responsibilities for housework and the care of younger siblings by their mothers, and this was the case for this woman. Most of her educational values had been transmitted to her though her work experiences, and she clearly had resisted her mother's expectations that she would center her life on doing the domestic work that maintained their family. In other words, this Latina actively resisted the gendered beliefs and expectations, not only of

the dominant culture, but also those of her own subordinated racial/ethnic group and social class, as well as those of her family.

Although achieving and maintaining this form of independence was important to many of the women who participated in the study, doing so was particularly important for this group of women. As a 20 year old Latina indicated when discussing her responses to her own mother's priorities:

No, she had very little to say to me about education and my future. Not that she didn't want me to go to school; she did. But she would say to me that I need to learn to cook and clean for my husband. And I would say that this isn't old times anymore, and my husband is going to cook and clean for me!

This young Latina ran away from home when she was 14 years old and had been taking care of herself since. Her account of the circumstances surrounding her decision to leave reflect the degree to which a desire and commitment to achieve and maintain independence was central to these women. This account also illustrates how, as Dorothy Smith (1987) has argued, women often resist subordination without knowing how to resist:

I couldn't stand my mother any more, and I couldn't stand her boyfriend anymore. And I wanted freedom. I felt locked in. I was locked in! And I wanted some type of outside life for me. Basically, I had to be home by 3:00 every day, and I was timed. And no one cared about my homework, all they cared about was that everything was clean and that dinner was on the table.

And I could even say could I go to the movies at 1:00 in the afternoon, and the answer was always "no." If I wanted to go down to the corner store, I had to take my little sisters with me. So I felt like I was in jail, and I couldn't take it. So I didn't want to be there anymore. And my mom had a way of speaking to me when she was mad.

So that morning I wasn't even planning to run away. Well, I wanted to, but I didn't know where I would go or anything. And then that morning my mother and I had a fight, and she said that she was just dying for me to get a husband and get married and get out.

*And well, I didn't get a husband, but I did get out.*

As the Latina above had done, this young Latina resisted the oppression/subordination that was imposed on her through her family, but grounded in the gendered expectations of the dominant culture and of her own subordinated racial/ethnic group and social class. When

asked how she felt about this experience, now that she could look back on it six years later, she replied:

Well, it's made me who I am because I'm a very independent person now, but I do regret not finishing my schooling and how all that went, like I feel bad about it because I feel that I was doing really well in school, and I could have excelled. But to this day I am happy that I left home because *I know it was what I needed to do to survive.*

This Latina ended up dropping out of school as a result of leaving home, and, as the account above indicates, she regretted this because she was doing well academically at the time; however, she also maintained that the decision she made to run away from home was the right decision for her, and she was adamant about this (i.e., "I know it was what I needed to do to survive."). Many of the women who participated in the study placed a very high value on thinking independently: They trusted their own judgment, and they had a very high level of self-confidence in their decision-making abilities. As these women exercised both the "power of a free mind" and "the power to disbelieve," they were engaged in the social process of resisting gender, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination without knowing how to resist; they were in the process of writing their own histories, of becoming the authors of their own lives. These women were, in fact, engaged in the political process of struggling to achieve a standpoint.

Finally, there was an even more general level at which one woman, a 22 year old Irish American woman, invested in thinking independently. This independent thinking led to a more global explanation (or social class analysis) of why she, and other women like herself, were educationally disadvantaged in the first place. When asked why she wanted to achieve a bachelor's degree (i.e., her reasons), she replied:

I never got a chance to have a childhood, and I know that I want my children to be able to have a childhood and a good one at that. I know when I look back on my life I still have a lot of painful memories, and I know a lot of it had to do with being poor, and my mother's suicide and my father's alcohol addiction, all of this, a lot of it had to do with us being poor.

It all started with us being a poor family in the projects, and my parents never finished, they finished high school, but they didn't go to college, and they got stuck in dead end jobs.

I want to really be able to provide for my kids, and let them know that good hard work pays off. And that like I can be able to do, to accomplish anything. And the higher the degree I attain, the more I can show them this.

One of several women in the study who externalized attributions for family hardships that led to dropping out of school, this woman, like the Latina discussed in the introduction, placed ultimate responsibility on the social conditions created by poverty, not on her family. Moreover, her educational aspirations and expectations provided a foundation for the development of a critical consciousness. Thus, achieving and maintaining independence in various forms was generally grounded in a woman's insistence on thinking independently; on developing her own assessments of, and explanations for, both her immediate and broader life circumstances; in trusting in her own judgment and intuition; and in having the courage to violate the expectations of others if she determined that she needed to do so to protect herself, her children, or to advance her own interests and those of her family. In other words, these women resisted.

Thus, the women who participated in the study translated the educational values that had been transmitted to them through their families and/or work experiences into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations because educational attainment served as a potential means both for achieving and maintaining independence and for transmitting educational values to their children. Although this independence took various forms—independence in relationships with male partners or husbands or adult children, independence in relationship to the expectations of parents and/or others, independence in terms of developing explanations for their own experiences and the life circumstances they had faced—all of these forms of independence were important for translating educational values into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. This social process

was also important because through it, these women became engaged in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

### Accepting Family Responsibility

Many of the women who participated in the study translated educational values into educational aspirations and expectations through social processes of accepting responsibility in various ways for themselves and their families. Along with providing materially for their children, these women also wanted to convey the importance of education to them, a way of accepting family responsibility for transmitting educational values. But also an important social process through which they cultivated educational aspirations and expectations for themselves. In addition, by accepting family responsibility in these ways, the women also confronted dialectical relations between accepting this family responsibility, on the one hand, and resisting gender, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination, on the other.

*Conveying the importance of education to children.* For example, when asked why she had enrolled in her adult education and literacy program, the 22 year old Irish American woman above framed her class analysis with an articulation of how becoming a mother had influenced her educational aspirations and expectations:

Well in my family nobody ever pointed out that education is key. It's like education is the one thing that nobody can ever take away from you, and I never realized that until I had my kids.

I found myself laying in a hospital bed, and I'd had my son, and I had no job, and I had no place to go, and I knew that I was going to be raising him by myself and that's when I thought what am I going to do. I could either succumb to all of my surroundings and my environment and my pain and let it manifest in me and live a life of excuses, and just like tragic drama all the time, or I could do things differently.

I didn't really have parents, and I just didn't want my kids to not have a parent. My son already had a father that didn't love him, but he had a mother who could love him and do right by him. Nothing was ever done right by me by my parents, and I couldn't change that for me, but I didn't have to do that to my son.

This young woman started her adult education and literacy program as soon as her son was five months old. Her daughter was born about three years later. At the time her educational

life history was recorded she had just successfully completed her GED exams and had enrolled in a local community college; her son was five and her daughter was two. When asked what place learning now had in her life, she replied:

Everything in my life. I don't want to be an idiot. It's very important to me because I need to be the best that I can be to educate my children, and if I always have my standards low then my children are going to set their standards low. I want my children to set their standards high—even higher than mine.

Like this woman, all of the relatively younger women who were the mothers of young children and/or adolescents stressed the importance of transmitting educational values to their children and accepted this as a responsibility of mothers.

In some cases, women linked accepting responsibility for their children directly to achieving and maintaining independence for themselves. For example, the 20 year old Latina discussed above, who had dropped out of school when she ran away from home to avoid excessive domestic responsibilities, clearly made this connection when she explained why she had enrolled in her adult education and literacy program:

Well, like I said, I don't know what I want to do exactly, but I don't want to sit around, and I know if you want something done right you have to do it yourself. And I don't want to have to depend on anyone. I want to do things for myself. That's why I am here [in this program]. And not only do I want to, I have to. I don't want my daughter to see me sitting in the house all day. What am I going to be like my mother thinking, "do the cooking and cleaning so you can get a husband."

I don't want to do that. And I don't want my daughter to think it is okay to have to depend on men. I want her to see from me going to school and everything that she can also do it, and I want her to learn from me so that she will be able to do it. I want to set an example for her. I am determined to prove, I have to prove, not only to everyone else, but to myself and to my own daughter, that I can do this.

Although this young woman does not have a clearly defined career goal, her determination is grounded in the social process of accepting responsibility for transmitting educational values to her daughter so that her daughter will not have to depend on anyone else, including a potential male partner. In accepting this responsibility, she herself translates educational values into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. On the one hand, this Latina actively resists the beliefs, values, and expectations of the dominant

culture and those of her own subordinated racial/ethnic culture by resisting gender subordination: This woman refuses to subordinate herself to a male partner or husband, and she intends to encourage her own daughter to do the same. On the other hand, this Latina accepts the very gendered expectation, primarily imposed by the dominant culture, that she is morally obligated to accept full responsibility for the transmission of educational values to her children because she is a mother. In other words, at the same time that she resists being subordinated by a male partner or husband, her acceptance of full responsibility for conveying educational values to her daughter reinforces the dominant cultural belief that it is mothers who are solely responsible for the educational outcomes of their children.

*Sending remittances.* Another important way women translated educational values into educational aspirations and expectations was in using education as a way to earn money to help other family members with their expenses, including their educational expenses. This, of course, was most common for the women of immigrant status—the Haitian and Cape Verdean women and the Nicaraguan Latina—for whom sending remittances, and/or helping other family members who were also immigrants, was an important way of conveying educational values and, at the same time, translating these values into educational aspirations and expectations.

For example, the 46 year old Haitian woman explained that her son was still in Haiti, and she was providing money for his educational expenses as well as planning to go on to college herself as soon as she achieved her U.S. high school diploma:

My first goal was to come here [to the United States] and make money to sponsor myself and my family back home. My son is in twelfth grade. And all of the colleges in Haiti are now collapsed by the earthquake. So my goal right now is to find a University in Santa Domingo in the Dominican Republic for him to attend. I have also asked a friend in Boston to contact one of her friends who may be able to help me get him a grant to come over here to the United States for college.

But I don't want my son to come over here without legal status because I know what I've gone through, and I don't want him to go through the same. I have told him it is better for him to stay in Haiti now because I pay to send him to private school. I

have told him: "I am going to send you money for school. But if you come to the United States you will not be able to go to school at all."

I know what happens to young black men in this country. That's why I thank God that I have communication with others about what is best for him. Yes, I have to have a part-time job and go to school too. I sacrifice myself. I'm one woman. I have my privacy, but I stay in one room because I know I have a son to give an education. It is better for me to be where I am so my son can have a better life.

Other immigrant women were helping their families in their countries of origin more generally. For example, at the time her educational life history was recorded, a 38 year old Nicaraguan Latina who had first immigrated to Costa Rica and then to the United States had been supporting her mother and brothers in Nicaragua for over two decades:

Well, after the program I was working for in Nicaragua ended, I moved to Costa Rica. I went there to work and to send money back to my mother to help her with my brothers' schooling. There was no money for me. And at the same time, I studied English grammar at an institute there.

I knew I wanted to leave my town. I didn't want to be around the same thing over and over. I was more adventurous. I went to the embassy, but they denied a visa for the United States. This was why I went to Costa Rica because I was able to finally get the visa for there.

And then I finally came here to the United States in 1991, and I continued my study of English. I went to two programs before coming to [this one] also to study English. And now I am finished with this program and will have my adult high school diploma in a few weeks. And I still send money back to my mother.

These women's experiences were typical of the immigrant women as a group. In all of these cases, the women are translating the educational values that have been transmitted to them through their families and/or their work experiences into educational aspirations and expectations—their own and those of their children or other family members. They were also resisting gender, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination.

*Family responsibilities as obstacles.* Paradoxically, accepting family responsibility was also often mentioned, particularly by the older women, as one of the greatest obstacles they faced in attempting to complete their adult education and literacy programs. Several of the women in the study had raised grandchildren or had adopted children. As the 58 year old African American woman discussed in the section above commented: "I was always so busy

with the kids and helping everybody else . . . ." Similarly, when asked what were some of the greatest obstacles and/or challenges in completing her adult education and literacy program, the 61 year old African American woman described her experience, which was typical, thus:

For me it was mainly being focused because I had three biological kids, and I had adopted four more kids. And they were all at home at the time I was in the [adult education and literacy] program. And then I'm in school trying to focus on my work, and I'm saying when I go home I've got to do this and that.

Because what I would do, I would do my work at school, and then I would go home and study for an hour and then I would cook dinner, so I would be ready to help them with their homework when they came home, and to get their clothes and things ready for the next day.

And then once I got them into bed, I would study for school. And that's how my whole day was, and I would be sitting in school half the time planning out the rest of my day, what I was going to need to be doing at home. So it was just mainly trying to bring my mind into focus on school.

Another typical experience of accepting family responsibility follows, this from a 39 year old Latina:

I have to say that I'm really proud of my kids because even though I've done it by myself, and I have a section 8, I take care of my two kids, and I take care of myself, and I take care of my mom, and I take care of my uncle. And sometimes there are walls that go up, and I can't come to school sometimes because I have to do stuff at home for my family and my kids.

I take them to school and I take them all to their appointments, and it's just me for everything. And then I feel like I got too much going on, and I'm so stressed out, and I'm overwhelmed, I'm tired, I haven't gotten enough sleep, and I'm exhausted. So it's tough.

As is indicated by the accounts above, for some of the women family responsibilities became, at times, overwhelming, which worked against their potential for success in their adult education and literacy programs, though this did not negate the important ways in which their participation became a vehicle for the transmission of educational values to others, particularly their children.

Although these accounts describe family responsibilities as an obstacle/challenge to educational attainment, it is important to note that most of these women successfully

negotiated these family responsibilities either going on to complete their adult education and literacy programs or to continue working toward doing so. In other words, although family responsibilities were identified by the women themselves as typical obstacles or barriers, they were, for the most part, not insurmountable ones for the women who participated in the study. At the same time, these accounts show how lack of access to affordable child care and burdens imposed by overwhelming family responsibilities—both outcomes of gender and social class organization—often placed severe limits on these women's opportunities for participating in adult education and literacy programs at crucial times in their lives. Many of the women who participated in this study waited years for their children to reach an age where they were in school for the full day before they could return to school themselves.

*To summarize*, the social processes through which educational values were translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations were: 1) acquiring self-confidence in one's competence academically, socially, occupationally and/or professionally; 2) achieving and maintaining independence in one's relationships with male partners or husbands, in one's relationships with other family members, particularly parents or adult children, and in one's own thinking as it relates to developing rationales for personal and professional goals and priorities and for making sense of life circumstances and events (i.e., thinking independently); and 3) accepting responsibility for providing for one's self and for one's family, including the responsibility of transmitting educational values to one's children. In addition, each of these social processes created potential spaces for resisting gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination, which many of the women took advantage of as they made choices and decisions about their educational futures and those of their children or grandchildren. As women cultivated educational aspirations and expectations, they also engaged in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

### Experiences in Adult Education and Literacy Programs: Summary and Discussion

Whereas early schooling provided an important social context for the transmission of educational values, reinforcing or negating the explanatory frameworks used to convey the importance of education, later schooling in adult education and literacy programs provided an important social context for the translation of educational values into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. For the women who participated in this study, adult education and literacy programs were a resource for developing academic skills, for attaining secondary-level educational credentials, for cultivating educational aspirations and expectations, and for establishing occupational and/or professional goals.

For those women who had completed high school prior to entering their adult education and literacy programs—all but one of whom described positive early schooling experiences—positive experiences in adult education and literacy programs provided a relatively seamless transition to returning to school, even for older women who had been out of school for long periods of time. Congruently, for those women who had dropped out of high school, yet also described positive early schooling experiences, positive experiences in adult education and literacy programs facilitated their successful return to school. Although many women cycled in and out of several programs before they were able to find "the right program" for them at the "right time," these women's accounts indicated that their current programs were meeting their academic needs, as well as meeting their needs for support and encouragement to continue their educations. These women were making academic progress, and they were establishing and reaching their educational goals.

For those women who had dropped out of high school and described negative early schooling experiences, positive experiences in adult education and literacy programs provided them with later schooling opportunities that were an alternative to what they had experienced in elementary school and high school. In other words, adult education and literacy programs expanded their choices. As adults, these women could discriminate

among several different adult education and literacy programs to find the program that would best meet their needs. In addition, because these women were now adults, they had greater control over the family contexts through which they accessed schooling in adult education and literacy programs. In other words, women whose early schooling experiences were poorly integrated with family could now formulate their own family priorities and educational expectations as adults.

Although as adults these women now had their own set of family circumstances with which to contend, most found it possible to distance themselves from much of the family abuse, neglect, crises, and disruption that had once punctuated their lives as children and adolescents in their families of origin. Although early schooling experiences were often a negative force in their lives, their later experiences in adult education and literacy programs that met their educational needs became a positive one. Just as participation in their adult education and literacy programs was considered part of the plan of recovery for the four women in the study who had completed substance abuse treatment programs, positive experiences in adult education and literacy programs helped women "recover" from the effects of negative early schooling experiences on their long-term educational trajectories.

In the context of their positive experiences in their adult education and literacy programs, the women were able to translate the educational values transmitted to them through their families by their mothers and/or grandmothers, and through their work experiences in the context of the newly restructured economy, into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. The women accomplished this through the social processes of acquiring self-confidence over time, achieving and maintaining forms of independence, and accepting family responsibility. And, as the foregoing analysis shows, the women's educational goals, as well as their occupational and/or professional goals, were inspired by these educational aspirations and expectations.

Another way of understanding these social processes—processes through which educational values are translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations—is as forms and/or strategies of resistance. When educationally disadvantaged women who follow non-traditional educational trajectories cultivate educational aspirations, they are attempting to use education to resist gender, age, racial/ethnic, and/or social class subordination at some level in some way. In other words, these women are attempting to alter power relations in their favor by expanding the educational and occupational and/or professional choices that are available to them. Hence, they are engaged in the struggle to achieve a standpoint.

For example, in this study, educationally disadvantaged women who acquired self-confidence over time expressed this confidence as a firm belief in their own academic, social, and/or occupational/professional competence, a belief that was engendered by their successful participation in their adult education and literacy programs. In doing so, these women resisted gender, age, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination because in the United States *these forms of competence are associated with those who are native, young, white, middle-class, well-educated, and male*. In other words, acquiring self-confidence in one's competence can be thought of as a form and/or strategy of resistance because it contributes to educationally disadvantaged women's ability to increase their social and cultural capital, making it more likely that they will be able to use education as a means of achieving upward social mobility. In doing so, these women are at the same time resisting public welfare and workforce development policy mandates that privilege low-wage work over education for educationally disadvantaged women (i.e., "work first" philosophies). Most importantly, their self-confidence in their academic abilities increases the probability that they will use their critical and analytical skills as a means for developing a critical consciousness.

As another example, those women who translated educational values into educational aspirations and expectations through a desire and commitment to achieve and maintain independence in relationship to male partners or husbands resisted gender oppression/subordination (and/or male violence), as did the Latinas who refused to accept their mothers' valuation of marriage, housework, and childcare responsibilities over their own educations. By prioritizing their own assessments of their educational needs, these women resisted their mothers' attempts to impose a traditionally gendered system of cultural values and beliefs upon them. And, when the young Irish American woman traced the origin of much of her family's tragedy—her mother's suicide, her father's alcoholism—to the fact that they were a poor family from the projects in Boston, she resisted social class subordination by placing responsibility for these tragedies, *and their educational outcomes for her*, on the organization of social class relations in the United States. In other words, like the Latina discussed in the introduction, she didn't blame herself or her family of origin, she blamed "poverty"—i.e., the social class organization of society. Moreover, this woman developed the critical thinking skills that made it possible for her to offer such an insightful and well-informed class analysis in her adult education and literacy program—another example of how the transmission of educational values and the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations provided a foundation for the development of a critical consciousness and created spaces for the practice of resistance.

And, as a final example, when the older women who participated in the study refused to allow cultural beliefs about the age-appropriateness of education, particularly advanced education, to limit their educational aspirations and expectations, they resisted subordination because of their *gendered* age. Hence, when educationally disadvantaged women cultivate educational aspirations and expectations, *particularly when they aspire to attain a college degree*, they are, at some level, resisting forms of gender, age, racial/ethnic and/or social class subordination in an attempt to alter power relations in their favor. As

these women interrogated their experience of oppression/subordination, they developed a critical consciousness, created potential spaces for the practice of resistance, and engaged in the political struggle to achieve a standpoint. As the forty-six year old Haitian women who participated in the study put it:

I struggle to go to school because for me education is power, especially for women. When you are educated you can say what you want and you can say what you need. But if you are not educated, you have to swallow whatever they give you because you have no choice. But when a woman has education, she has choices.

For the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study, the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations provided a means for empowerment by expanding their access to meaningful choices.

## **CHAPTER 7: Persistence in Adult Education and Literacy Programs and Transition to College**

This chapter addresses the broader purpose of the dissertation: to explain the relationships among educationally disadvantaged women's educational aspirations and expectations, their persistence in adult education and literacy programs, and their transition to college. The first section of the chapter offers a working definition of "persistence," and, based on this definition, the second section explains what persistence accomplishes in the context of the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations in adult education and literacy programs. The third section of the chapter offers a working definition of "transition" as the term is used in the field of adult education and literacy. The fourth section of the chapter then explains how strategies for negotiating the challenges of transition were developed by the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in the study.

The analysis primarily is based on data collected from accounts of the educational life histories of the eight women in the study who had transitioned to college. Each of these women had attained a U.S. high school diploma or GED, three had enrolled in college and were scheduled to begin the following fall, three had been attending college for about two years, one had graduated from college, and one had dropped out of college for health reasons after completing her second year. Four of these women had been high school drop outs—one Cape Verdean, one African American, one Latina, and one Irish American woman. The other four women had prior educational attainment of at least a secondary credential. One Haitian and one Cape Verdean woman earned bachelor's degrees before migrating to the United States. One African American woman had completed two years of college toward a bachelor's degree. And one Irish American woman had earned a high school diploma. Five of the women had attended Central Alternative School (CAS) and three had attended Northside Family Learning Program (NFLP).

## DEFINING PERSISTENCE

In the adult education and literacy literature, both academic achievement and educational attainment are generally considered the outcome of "persistence," which is defined as regular participation in an adult education and literacy program to the completion of a secondary educational credential (i.e., adult high school diploma or GED) or to the fulfillment of the student's educational goals. According to this working definition, participation may be continuous or it may be cyclical, involving periodic stop-outs (i.e., informally dropping out of a program, but returning to the same program as soon as possible) or drop-outs (i.e., formally dropping out of one program, but eventually enrolling in another). As established in Chapter 6, a number of women in this study cycled through adult education and literacy programs to locate the "right program" at "the right time" *for them*. Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999) first used the term "persistence" in this way, arguing that its use allowed both practitioners and researchers in the field of adult education and literacy greater latitude for considering issues related to participation from the point of view of students rather than solely from the point of view of adult education practitioners. However, both of these terms—participation and persistence—have evolved from early psychological models of motivation, which explain motivation as an individual trait or (often fixed) characteristic of individuals. In other words, persistence is understood as the outcome of a woman's motivation to participate (i.e., motivation=participation=persistence).

Alternatively, some theorists in adult education and literacy have focused on explaining students' *lack of persistence*—or their resistance to education and schooling using various methods. Based on an analysis of ten works of literary fiction, Quigley (1990) explored the rationales or "hidden logics" underlying each protagonist's decision to reject schooling (p. 103). Based on this analysis, Quigley found that resistance was not a rejection of learning or a rejection of the acquisition of knowledge, but rather a means for retaining one's psychological sense of self-worth and cultural sense of community. The importance of

a consideration of cultural identities and specific cultural contexts is also a prevalent theme in studies of the acquisition of literacy skills. Sparks (2002) has argued that adult learners bring with them "already formed and forming cultural literacy practices" that shape the meanings that literacy holds (and will come to hold) for them (p. 65). This notion of literacy practices also suggests that conditions of material deprivation, and the unequal distribution of power that produces them, are important features of the cultural contexts in which literacy is both practiced and learned (Stromquist 1990; Sparks 2002).

Focusing on the concept of motivation in literacy education, Beder and Valentine (1990) have argued that "expressed motivations" should be understood as the "social meanings" learners attach to education (p. 94). Much more than mere skills acquisition, literacy learning should be understood as a symbolic activity that demonstrates the desire and will to initiate life changes. Ahl (2006) has argued that motivation is a theoretical construct based upon the relational proposition that motivation focuses future behavior, but she questions the theoretical validity of this proposition, noting that there is little empirical evidence that individual attitudes related to motivation are correlated with subsequent behavior. She suggests motivation be studied not in terms of what *it is* when attributed to individuals, but in terms of what motivation *accomplishes* for individuals within a complex set of social relations. Therefore, what each of these theories suggests is that developing a comprehensive understanding of persistence requires a consideration of the social and cultural contexts that shape it, both in terms of the meanings that students attach to participation and persistence and in terms of the social processes that shape and are shaped by these meanings.

#### ACCOMPLISHING PERSISTENCE

Informed by the discussion above, this analysis addresses persistence not as an outcome of individual motivation but as a complex set of social relations and social

processes, focusing not on what persistence *is*, but on what it *does*, or accomplishes, in relationship to the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. When asked about the obstacles they had faced in continuing their educations, most of the twenty women who participated in the study described serious financial difficulties, the necessity to work while attending school, and/or overwhelming family obligations as primary obstacles (e.g., "It's the money; there's never enough." . . . "It's just me for everything."). However, the eight women who had transitioned to college, although they identified many of these same obstacles, did not focus their accounts on them. Rather, the women who transitioned to college identified and focused on obstacles that were more directly related to their schooling, socially and/or academically; the women who had not transitioned to college rarely did so. In addition to focusing their accounts on obstacles directly related to their academic performance and achievement, the women who transitioned to college often described the strategies they had developed for overcoming these obstacles in the context of their participation in their adult education and literacy programs.

As established in Chapter 6, educational values transmitted through both family and work are translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations through social processes of acquiring self-confidence, achieving and maintaining independence, and accepting family responsibility. However, analysis of the educational life histories of the eight women who transitioned to college indicated that two additional social processes contributed to their ability to act upon their educational aspirations and expectations by overcoming obstacles to their academic performance and achievement: 1) adopting the identity of "serious student" and 2) producing a sustained academic effort. In other words, both of these social processes were the outcome of persistence.

The adult education and literacy programs that these women attended—CAS and NFLP—facilitated the development of this persistence in three ways. First, and most importantly, both programs offered academic counseling that supported and encouraged the

development of educationally disadvantaged women's academic skills *in the context of conveying clearly articulated academic expectations for which students were held accountable*—the most important organizational resource for these women. Second, schooling in adult education and literacy programs offered opportunities for organizing study groups and forming partnerships with classmates for completing assigned homework, important strategies that students were encouraged to practice to facilitate their academic success and to further develop their social skills. In other words, these women were introduced to collaborative approaches to learning and were encouraged to use them to overcome academic challenges. Because fear of failure is a primary barrier for educationally disadvantaged women, providing support for developing study skills and encouraging students to engage in collaborative work with classmates are important instructional approaches for helping students build confidence in their academic abilities, which helps them overcome fear of failure. Finally, these women's participation in their adult education and literacy programs offered an opportunity for them to learn how educational institutional environments operate through bureaucratic processes and provided them with experience in negotiating these processes.

#### Overcoming Obstacles: Becoming a "Serious Student"

Adopting the identity of "serious student" was an important social process through which women overcame obstacles to their academic performance and achievement. For example, when asked what had been her greatest obstacles in transitioning to college, a 61 year old African American woman began by describing how family obligations had created challenges for her:

Really, the biggest challenge for me in college wasn't the [academic] work, I had that down, it was simply going to school. Getting up and going. Like, just getting there! Because I had to get up and deal with all the kids, and keep yelling at them to get out of bed, so I could get out myself because I took two of them to the bus stop, and their bus would be late, and I would end up having to take them to school, and then get myself to school. So it was always about making sure the busses came, kids again, always the scheduling, these were the challenges.

However, she went on to explain that her academic work in college hadn't been particularly challenging for her because she had learned to focus on her studies in her adult education and literacy program:

For the most part I got along with everyone. A lot of my class was basically young people, mostly young women, and they were talking about how their man was doing this or that, and how they did this or that last night, and what they were going to be doing the next weekend. And on, and on, and on like this.

But I wasn't about all that. I wasn't in the program for that. I was a serious student. So I was right there with them, but I wasn't part of them. I was just doing my work, once I got that flow going, I didn't let anything distract me. I was very focused by that time. It was the right timing for me. I knew what I was there for.

When asked if she had faced similar challenges in college, again she focused on her identification as a "serious student":

Well there was a lot going on all the time there too—socially speaking. I mean it was college, right? And there were a lot of younger people, some older too, but a lot of young people. But because I had already been through all that, as an older student I mean, I already knew what I was there for, and I didn't let anything get in the way of that.

I had such a struggle just getting there with the kids and all. I couldn't afford to get distracted by anything. It was all about getting that degree. I mean I was a mom at home, and a caseworker at work, but when I got to school I was a student; that's just who I was, who I had to be.

Like most of the women in the group of eight who transitioned to college, this woman had adopted the identity of "serious student" in her adult education and literacy program and then carried that identification with her to college. In other words, these women's responses centered on their identification as students, rather than on their identification as employees who worked or mothers who cared for children and managed households. Although they often struggled to balance the competing responsibilities of family, work, and school, their commitment to their educational goals kept them focused on their schooling.

The women who participated in this study received support from teachers and academic counselors in their adult education and literacy programs in establishing their

educational and occupational goals. Both programs offered instruction that was focused on helping students explore their post-secondary education, vocational training, and career options. In addition, both programs provided opportunities for students to develop their computer skills in the context of exploring career opportunities. But most importantly, both programs employed engaged teachers who offered students the support and encouragement they needed to develop persistence.

When a 28 year old Latina who had been attending community college for two years was asked where she got the support and encouragement she needed to continue her education, she offered the following response:

Well, this [adult education and literacy] program is still where I get my support and encouragement. And I need that. I get help with my homework, and I still come two days a week, regularly. I mean, I know people from out at [community college], and they are nice people, but we don't hang out. Of course, I'm older than a lot of the students out there. I mean there are a lot of 18, 20 year olds. They party a lot, you know.

But I know what I'm doing when it comes to being a student. I was here [in the adult education and literacy program] for four years, and I learned how to focus on my work. By the time I went to college, and like I said, I wasn't even planning on college at first, I just wanted my GED. But now, I'm a college student and that means that you have to focus.

Although this Latina is 33 years younger than the African American woman above, she also draws a distinction between herself and the "younger" students who are less "focused." For these women, establishing their own academic performance and achievement as their top priority (e.g. "I couldn't afford to get distracted by anything.") was an important part of the process of accomplishing persistence in the context of the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. NFLP offered counseling and tutoring services to alumni who had transitioned to college, and this Latina continued to take advantage of these services regularly. The continued support and encouragement she received from her adult education and literacy program helped her maintain a focus on her studies in college, using the study skills she had developed in her adult education and literacy program. The notion that being

a serious student required focusing on one's academic work and distancing oneself from the socializing of classmates was held in common among the women who had transitioned to college.

A 46 year old Haitian woman described her classroom experiences and academic progress in relationship to other students in her adult education and literacy program, emphasizing that her focus was on maintaining an orientation toward achieving her own educational goals:

When I started it was a very big group. It was in a big class. But as the weeks passed, the group was becoming smaller and smaller. It was like people were dropping out. So I said to myself it's not about what other people are doing, it's about what I am doing. And I'm not dropping out.

And some people would say my sister came here and she was graduated in so many months. But it's not about someone else. It's about me. I told myself I needed one semester for each level, and by the grace of God, I made it. And it was a challenge, because I was working too, but I said I know what I am here for. And after each semester I was promoted to the next level, and now I will graduate very soon and move on to college in the fall—and that was my goal.

Finally, when asked if the expectations placed on her by teachers and counselors in her adult education and literacy program had been any different than those she had encountered in college, a 39 year old Cape Verdean woman answered:

Well, it was basically the same as in college. The expectation was that you come every day, be on time, do your work, do what you are supposed to do, don't waste time. I mean use your time wisely. And to do your best—to focus. Because some of the other students aren't as serious about school.

And it was hard for me because like I said before, I worked, I always worked, and my youngest son was still in elementary school then. I came to [the adult education and literacy program] to get my high school diploma, and then I decided I wanted to become a nurse, and that meant college. So, *they expected me to be a serious student.*

As the account above demonstrates, adult education and literacy programs that conveyed *high academic expectations for which students were held accountable* helped students to develop the persistence needed to successfully complete their adult education and literacy programs and transition to college—the expectation of regular attendance and punctuality,

using class time wisely, and completing assigned work were important supports to the development of persistence. The responses of the four women above were typical of the eight women who had transitioned to college. Each woman drew on the educational aspirations and expectations she had cultivated toward college and on the program resources made available to her—support and encouragement in the context of clearly articulated academic expectations—to develop persistence in her adult education and literacy program. In the words of the African American woman above—"I knew what I was there for."

These women were able to maintain a focus on their academic work because as serious students, their primary orientation was toward reaching their educational goals. Although all of the women who participated in the study identified similar obstacles to continuing their schooling, and found it necessary to negotiate competing identities, the women who transitioned to college emphasized obstacles that were directly related to their academic performance and achievement, describing the strategies they had developed to overcome these obstacles, strategies that evolved through social processes of identity formation—i.e., "becoming a serious student"—in the context of developing persistence in their adult education and literacy programs. Moreover, adopting the identity of serious student initiated a process of progressively taking one's academic and intellectual needs and potentials more seriously, providing a potential foundation for the development of a critical consciousness. As the 22 year old Latina who had just finished her second year of college put it: "I have no choice but to move forward because this is who I am now."

#### Overcoming Obstacles: Producing a Sustained Academic Effort

In addition to emphasizing their identifications as serious students, several of the women who had transitioned to college discussed particular academic challenges they had faced in their adult education and literacy programs. These women overcame academic challenges by producing a sustained academic effort with the support and encouragement of

teachers and counselors who convinced them they could achieve academically by learning to practice persistence. Indeed, for those women who are educationally disadvantaged, determination to succeed may be as important, and for some, more important, than academic ability. A 22 year old Irish American woman who had just attained her GED and enrolled in community college described her struggle with math:

Well, when I was in elementary school I could do the work but I always had a problem with math. I had tutors and everything but it just wouldn't click in my head. And I had trouble with it here [in my adult education and literacy program] too. I took the GED math test four times. Can you believe that! I took that math test four times in two years. And I can tell you I hate math!

The last time I took [the test], my teacher called because I missed school that day. My daughter was sick. And I knew it was about my test results. The time before, third time, I missed the test by ten points that time. Anyway, she said I had passed, and I was ecstatic! I literally thought I was never going to be able to pass that test, but I knew I had to pass it. I had to pass that test to get my GED and go on to college. And I did.

Several of the women who transitioned to college described math as one of their greatest academic challenges. However, like the woman above, with support and encouragement from teachers and counselors they managed to work through these challenges by producing a sustained academic effort that evolved through the cultivation of their educational aspirations and expectations for college. In other words, through the development of tenacity they produced a sustained academic effort: With the support and encouragement of teachers and counselors, they learned that they could achieve academically if they tried hard enough for long enough.

A 61 year old African American woman also traced her problems with math back to elementary school:

I remember the sixth grade. My uncle was a teacher, and he had a friend that was my math teacher. And I guess that he felt since my uncle was a teacher that I should know the stuff, and he would always put me on the spot. And I think I have a mental block in my head for math, and to this day I don't like math, and I think to this day that it stems back to [this teacher]. Because he just always put me on the spot.

So, math was hard for me. But I knew I could do it if I worked at it. Well, I knew I had to do it because I wanted my high school diploma, that was it. I had to do it.

When asked whether math had been a problem for her in college she said:

Well, I had to work at it, but I can't say I really struggled like before. Because I worked with a tutor on some things, and there were two or three of us in the class, and we would get together and, you know, to work on our homework together. Well, it was still hard for me, like the block was still there, but by that time, I knew I could do it because I already had done it. Because I put my mind to it. And I knew I wanted that degree. So that was most of it.

In all of the cases where women who had transitioned to college faced particular academic challenges, they addressed these challenges in the context of the cultivation of their educational aspirations and expectations. In the process of producing a sustained academic effort, they acquired self-confidence in their academic abilities. At the same time, producing a sustained academic effort was a social process that allowed them to develop creative strategies for working through these challenges.

For example, many of these women, like the African American woman above, had worked with tutors or joined study groups, collaborative approaches to learning that they were introduced to by their teachers and counselors in their adult education and literacy programs that facilitated the development of both their academic and social skills. A 60 year old Cape Verdean woman described strategies she had developed to improve her proficiency with English—her greatest academic challenge. When asked if she had ever studied English before she said:

Oh yes. I studied Portuguese, French, and English. But it wasn't enough English. And when I came here [to the United States] I couldn't speak fluently because I knew what I wanted to say, but I had a hard time communicating it. Because I'm better at French than English. And Portuguese is my first language, but I also speak Creole, which is a day language.

So when I came [to the adult education and literacy program], many of the students spoke English very well, but they had difficulty with math. So I had classmates that were coming to my house to study with me. We had a study group. I was teaching them about math, and we talked about ideas for our papers. So, I was helping them, and they were helping me.

Through the production of a sustained academic effort, in this case working with a study group in her home, this woman managed to become proficient enough in English to attain

both an associate's degree and a bachelor's degree after graduating from her adult education and literacy program with her U.S. high school diploma. All but one of the women who had transitioned to college indicated that they had done homework with a classmate, worked with a tutor, or joined a study group to help them overcome academic challenges. These study groups were important because women learned that they were not alone in facing academic challenges, that other women faced these challenges too. The women who studied together created a sense of community where they helped and supported each other, which was important for developing both social and academic skills.

Of course, academic challenges were not unique to the women who had transitioned to college. Several other women in the study indicated that a particular academic challenge had impeded their academic progress. For example, a 58 year old African American woman explained that she had completed all of the requirements for her adult high school diploma but problems with math kept her from graduating:

Well, I've had problems with math since the 9th grade. I can tell you that it comes back to me, I still like the math, but I can remember the difficulty I had with plotting the graph, and doing, well that's what's holding me back now, I'm trying to finish the math. I've taken the MCAS math test five times. Yes, I've taken it five times, and I keep missing it by two points! Just two points!

When asked if she thought she would be able to complete the program, she replied:

Oh yes, absolutely! It may take me . . . Well, I thought I would be graduated from here now, this year, but this test held me up. But I'm expecting to go all the way. Things may come up, problems, situations, but this is something I want to do. I want to do this. And I'm not going to let age stop me.

I've been here now about four years. But I want to go to college, get my bachelor's and my master's. I've considered [community college], but I would love to go to [...] College. Because I have to do this. It's just in me.

The sustained academic effort these women produced in response to academic challenges clearly demonstrates persistence, but what these women's experiences also show is that *persistence is accomplished in the context of the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations*. In other words, women who transitioned to college accomplished persistence

through their determination to reach their long-term educational goals and occupational and professional goals. In addition, the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study needed the support and encouragement of teachers and counselors who conveyed academic expectations to them and provided assistance with developing effective study skills and learning strategies to help them overcome academic challenges. Persistence accomplished a great deal for these women in terms of their overall academic achievement, which was very important to them both in terms of preparing them to succeed academically in college and for fostering the development of their critical and analytical thinking skills, which provided a potential means for developing a critical consciousness and engaging in the practice of resistance.

#### TRANSITIONING TO COLLEGE

Use of the term "transition" to describe the process of students enrolling in post-secondary education after completing adult education and literacy programs has become widely accepted in the field of adult education and literacy. However, there is very little research that investigates the transition patterns or experiences of adult education and literacy students (Zafft, Kallenbach, and Spohn 2006; Alamprese 2004). Most research on transition to college focuses on the benefits of post-secondary education for students who fall into one or more of the categories of non-traditional, low-income, or low-skilled students or students enrolled in college developmental education courses; however, students who transition to college from adult education and literacy programs generally fall into one if not more of these categories. Horn (1996) developed a profile of the "seven characteristics of non-traditional students" that is now widely used by researchers in adult education. A non-traditional student is one who: 1) delays enrollment, 2) attends part-time, 3) works full-time, 4) has an "independent" financial aid status, 5) has dependents other than a spouse, 6) is a single parent, and/or 7) qualifies for admission with an alternative high school

credential (i.e., adult high school diploma or GED). A student with any one or more of these characteristics is considered a non-traditional college student.

Most research on transition to post-secondary education in the field of adult education and literacy focuses on describing the organizational structure and program practices of the transition programs students are enrolled in rather than on the transition patterns or experiences of the students themselves. In other words, most research is initiated from an administrative and/or institutional perspective. Zafft, Kallenbach, and Spohn (2006) reviewed a number of reports and developed a list of six "areas of concern" (i.e., obstacles) related to adult education and literacy students and their access to post-secondary education: 1) inadequate academic preparation, 2) multiple financial constraints, including limited knowledge of and access to financial aid; 3) family obligations; 4) new, complex, and often confusing institutional environments; 5) psychological barriers, especially lack of confidence in one's academic abilities (i.e., fear of failure) and 6) need for extensive personal, academic, and/or career counseling. In other words, students in adult education and literacy programs face many of the same obstacles that most non-traditional college students face.

#### Negotiating the Challenges of Transition

The eight women in this study who transitioned to college, although they faced many of the obstacles listed above, managed to overcome them. None of these women reported receiving extensive academic counseling at the colleges or universities they attended, although women who were alumni of NFLP, as noted above, continued to receive tutoring and/or academic and family counseling from this program while attending college. Although CAS did not provide the extensive academic counseling and tutoring services that were available to the women who had attended NFLP, the coordinator of CAS's college transition program did provide academic counseling to alumni who had transitioned to college. In addition, those women in the study who had once struggled with fear of failure had, for the

most part, overcome this psychological barrier as they developed their academic skills and acquired self-confidence in their academic abilities through participation in their adult education and literacy programs prior to transitioning to college.

Although many of the women who transitioned to college faced academic challenges and were underprepared in some academic areas, they had developed a level of persistence in their adult education and literacy programs that made it possible for them to work through these challenges. Several women indicated that they found the institutional environment of higher education, particularly its bureaucratic administrative practices, daunting; however, they learned to navigate this environment, often with the help of teachers and counselors from their adult education and literacy programs. In addition, their participation in their adult education and literacy programs gave them the opportunity to learn how educational institutional environments operate through bureaucratic processes and provided experience in negotiating these processes, which was invaluable to them as they transitioned to college and learned how to navigate the institutional environment of higher education.

In other words, the women who transitioned to college had, for the most part, developed effective strategies for negotiating the challenges of transition. They accomplished this by drawing on social and professional skills they had developed in their adult education and literacy programs, many of which were directly related to their demonstration of persistence. Although many of these women were relatively academically underprepared, particularly in math and writing, their critical and analytical skills were well developed and their self-confidence in their academic abilities kept them open to new learning opportunities and new learning environments—orientations to education that they had developed in their adult education and literacy programs. Finally, their strategies for negotiating the challenges of transition were developed in the context of the cultivation of their educational aspirations and expectations and through commitment to reaching their

educational and occupational/professional goals. Because their participation in their adult education and literacy programs provided them with opportunities to experience academic success, most of the women who transitioned to college believed that they were both academically prepared to achieve a college education and worthy of one.

### Building Self-Esteem and New Learning Opportunities

The educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study learned to appreciate new learning opportunities as the support and encouragement received from teachers and counselors in their adult education and literacy programs built their self-esteem *in the context of clearly articulated academic expectations*. When asked about the expectations that had been placed upon her by teachers and counselors in her adult education and literacy program, a 28 year old Latina who was enrolled in community college began her response by describing how teachers and counselors had built her self-esteem:

Well, when I was enrolled [in the adult education and literacy program], I was here all the time, I always attended, so that was no issue. But, well, like you start lonely with anxiety and depression, whatever you might be faced with. And I was pretty withdrawn. But then you talk with staff, counselors, and they become like a family. Once you start you are part of a larger family.

And they get things out of you: Like, "Oh, how are you doing? How are the kids? How is this going, how is that going?" And they start by building your self-esteem basically. And you start thinking that they care about you, and if they care about you, you must be somebody worth caring about.

After describing how the counseling in her program had built her self-esteem, this women went on to offer an assessment of the expectations of her teachers and counselors in her adult education and literacy program:

And they expect for you to be a good listener too. We have support groups, and you learn to listen to other people, and to give positive feedback. You learn how to read people. And with the teachers too. The staff want to see that you are open to new opportunities [to learn]. They want basically for us to take advantage of what they try to give us.

If they say we want you to write an essay for [an adult education and literacy publication], they want us to respond, *to follow through*. So they expected for me to be positive and to take advantage of the learning opportunities here. It's for your

own growth. And I've become really flexible. If you have something for me to do, like I'll do it. I'll try something new.

And this really helped me in college. Because everything was new there, all the time, it was always something new to learn, to deal with, and it was scary at first, but I also knew it was an opportunity. And I'm not scared anymore.

As this account shows, the development of an appreciation for new learning opportunities was often the result of meeting the expectations of teachers and counselors in adult education and literacy programs. By first building the women's self-esteem and convincing them of their self-worth, teachers and counselors were able to prepare educationally disadvantaged women to take advantage of new learning opportunities as they transitioned to college where they began navigating new learning environments. Moreover, as the account above demonstrates, learning to "become a good listener" and to "give positive feedback" were important opportunities for developing social skills and for building community with other educationally disadvantaged women as well as for learning how to appreciate new learning opportunities, rather than to be threatened by them.

Teachers and counselors in adult education and literacy programs who clearly articulated academic expectations, and who held students accountable for their academic performance in relationship to these expectations, *conveyed their confidence in these women's academic abilities*. This Latina was one of the four women in the study who was neither required nor encouraged to attend school; moreover, her early schooling did not meet her academic needs—she was simply "passed on" by her elementary and secondary school teachers, which had discouraged her and impeded her academic progress.

Alternatively, the academic expectations placed upon her by teachers and counselors in her adult education and literacy program facilitated her academic success. Building self-esteem was an important outcome of this social process: Teachers who conveyed academic expectations encouraged educationally disadvantaged women to believe that they were

worthy of an education because they had the intellectual and academic abilities to achieve one, which reinforced their educational aspirations and expectations for college.

#### Using Social and Professional Skills

Several women described how they had negotiated new learning environments using the social and professional skills they had developed in their adult education and literacy programs. A 39 year old Cape Verdean woman, who was attending community college to attain an associate's degree in nursing, explained how she had first managed to get a job in the medical field:

Well, I knew I was planning to become a nurse, but I was working part-time in food services at the time. And I wanted to work full-time in a doctor's office or a hospital. I wanted the experience. So when I was about to graduate from the [adult education and literacy program], I applied to this program downtown because I was ready then, and they helped people find jobs.

They teach you what you need to do in an interview, how to present yourself, everything about the job search process. It was an employment agency, but it was free. And I had to have four weeks off of school to attend the class, and I got permission from [the Director] to do this. And when I finished the program there at the agency, they helped me, and I was hired at the hospital to work in patient room services as soon as I graduated.

Having established her professional goals, this woman knew she needed to acquire work experience in the health care field and used the social and professional skills she had developed in her adult education and literacy program to gain access to and complete a job readiness program—a new learning environment—that would assist her with finding placement in the field. Most of the women who transitioned to college used their social and professional skills to participate in similar professional development activities or college readiness programs, often partnered with their adult education and literacy programs.

When asked to discuss any challenges she had faced in college, this woman described an issue she had resolved concerning her academic performance in one of her college courses:

Well, because I work full-time at the hospital they are paying for my tuition. They are very good at the hospital because they want you to get as much education as

possible. But, unfortunately, I failed a class. This is the only class that has caused me problems. It is [developmental writing] for ESL students, and this is the basics, you know of term papers, how to put them together, and I failed only the outlining. And you have to pass every component to pass the course. But I couldn't get the outlining right.

So, I went and talked to my teacher about it, and she said she couldn't help me at that point. So I went and talked to my counselor, and he said he couldn't help me. So I went and talked to the Director of the nursing program, and she said she would talk to the teacher because I did very well in everything else; it was only this class that gave me a problem.

The Director did intervene on this student's behalf and the three—the student, the teacher, and the Director—arrived at a mutually satisfactory resolution. All of the women who were attending college frequently found it necessary to negotiate administrative issues—grades, registration, requirements, scheduling, absences—within their new learning environments and often enlisted the cooperation of persons in authority to do so. In all cases, they drew on social and professional skills they had developed in their adult education and literacy programs to navigate these new learning environments whether in the area of professional development or when resolving issues related to their academic performance and/or their academic achievement. These women were learning to how to present themselves and to negotiate effectively on their own behalf.

#### Navigating Bureaucratic Processes

Both women in the study who had been attending college, and those who were involved for the first time in admissions and financial aid processes, worked their way through challenges that required navigating bureaucratic processes and negotiating with people in administrative authority. Although they continued to move forward, they often expressed apprehension about the new directions they were taking. The first step toward the admissions process was making the decision to apply for college, which was often made in conjunction with other women, and several women decided to apply for college as they completed their adult education and literacy programs.

*Applying to college.* As a 38 year old Irish American woman, who had just enrolled in a culinary arts program at a local community college, explained when asked about the challenges she had faced:

Well, I came back to classes [at the adult education and literacy program] in 2007, three years ago, because I battled with cancer in 2006, and I beat it. And then I came back to [the program]. I was volunteer cooking when I got sick, and then when I came back [the Education Director] said "Would you like to go into the classroom or keep on cooking?" And I wasn't sure what I wanted to do then.

Because, you know, I already had my high school diploma, so that wasn't what I was in the [program] for. I was here to learn, to strengthen my skills because I wanted to get back to work after my mom died, and the best [employers] were giving tests by then, and I couldn't pass.

So I wasn't even planning to apply to college at first. But then we were in workplace class, and I learned a lot from that. And I was talking with [other students], and they had plans for going to college to do this or that, and I thought, "Why not. Maybe this is the time to give it a try?" So I did, I applied. And I got accepted.

This woman's experience was typical of those who had already attained a high school diploma but cultivated educational aspirations and expectations for college in the process of strengthening their academic skills. Workplace classes and interaction with other women who were in the process of exploring their own career options often suggested possibilities for a better, if uncertain, occupational future. This woman went on to detail her experience of the admissions process in relationship to the educational and occupational goals she had established:

In fact, I just went earlier today for my placement test, and I was scared to death. And I mean I went into this room to take my test, and it was nerve racking. But I mean there was no wrong answer, so I can't explain it. I was scared to death, and I don't even have the money to go to college, so I'm thinking, "What am I doing all of this for, anyway?"

When asked what it was that kept her moving forward with her plans, she replied:

It's just that I know I need to move on with my life. I mean I'm 38 years old, and I want my own business, my own restaurant. I am going to get my associate's [degree] in culinary arts, and I just have to go with that. I will apply for financial aid next, but who knows how that will work out. Like I said, it's nerve wracking, but I know I need to move on with this. I want that associate's degree.

The uncertainty that this woman expressed was typical of those who were in the process of navigating enrollment processes, including taking placement exams and applying for financial aid in the context of new, complex, and often confusing institutional environments; however, these women were willing to take the risks necessary to move forward toward reaching their educational goals in the face of uncertain academic and financial futures. One of the primary reasons they were willing to take these risks is because they had cultivated educational aspirations and expectations that they linked to specific occupational and/or professional goals. In addition, they had the support of teachers and counselors in their adult education and literacy programs to help them navigate these enrollment processes.

*Applying for financial aid.* Most of the women who had just been accepted to college and were scheduled to begin classes the following fall were just moving into the financial aid application process and knew their ability to attend college was contingent on eligibility. As a 42 year old African American woman said: "Well, I'm hoping for the best because I can't turn back now after working this hard to get this far. I'll use my credit card if I have to, but I'm going!" The women who had more experience with financial aid expressed another concern: how they would pay back what they had borrowed. But like those who were just beginning college, they balanced concerns about borrowing against their commitment to reaching their educational goals.

A 60 year old Cape Verdean woman who had partially financed her undergraduate education through loans and now wanted to go on to graduate school explained:

Well, I applied for financial aid, and now that I have graduated with my bachelor's degree, I have to begin paying back my loans in September. And I'm okay with this, I can handle this. But now I want to go on. I want to get my master's and Ph.D. So I will need to borrow more money, and that makes me worried. I mean I know I will do well because I have always done well. That's not it. What I mean is at my age, to take on such a debt. But I also know I need to go on.

This woman was in the process of locating a graduate program that would meet her needs. Like most of the women who transitioned to college, financial aid was a concern. For those

who were just beginning college the concern was first applying, and then qualifying, for financial aid. For the older woman above who was moving toward graduate school, the concern was more about what amount of educational debt she could reasonably manage.

Although they expressed realistic concerns, all of the women who transitioned to college were committed to reaching their educational goals regardless of the financial cost of doing so: Each woman had determined that the personal cost of not reaching her educational goals would be far greater. In other words, these women were prepared to take both the personal and financial risks necessary to continue their educations. Indeed, one of the most common characteristics of the women who transitioned to college was an unrelenting determination to succeed. As the 42 year old African American woman above, who was returning to college after having dropped out over twenty years before put it: "And I'm smiling right now at the very prospect of walking across that campus." Most of the educationally disadvantaged women who had transitioned to college shared her enthusiasm.

#### Persistence and Transition: Summary and Discussion

The women who had transitioned to college demonstrated persistence in their adult education and literacy programs through the social processes of adopting the identity of "serious student" and producing a sustained academic effort, both of which made it possible for them to overcome obstacles to their academic performance and achievement. They learned that they could achieve academically if they tried hard enough for long enough. These social processes also provided a foundation for the development of critical and analytical thinking skills. Although the women often struggled to balance the competing responsibilities of family, work, and school, their commitment to their educational goals kept them focused on their schooling.

The adult education and literacy programs that these women attended facilitated the development of persistence in several ways: Teachers and academic counselors offered support and encouragement at the same time that they conveyed clearly articulated

academic expectations. In doing so, they demonstrated their confidence in the women's intellectual and academic abilities, which built self-esteem by convincing the women that they were indeed worthy of an education. Teachers and counselors also introduced the women to collaborative learning approaches that helped them work through academic challenges with their classmates, which further developed their social skills and helped them build community with other educationally disadvantaged women. Finally, participation in their adult education and literacy programs offered the women opportunities for learning how educational institutional environments operate, making it possible for them to begin to develop the academic and social skills needed to navigate them.

Drawing on the academic, social, and professional skills they had developed in their adult education and literacy programs, these women successfully negotiated the challenges of transition by being open to new learning opportunities and new learning environments. Although the bureaucratic processes of transition required them to navigate new, complex, and often confusing institutional environments, these women were willing to take the risks necessary to move forward even in the face of uncertain academic and financial futures because they were committed to reaching their educational goals.

As this analysis has shown, the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations is related to persistence in adult education and literacy programs and transition to college in a number of ways, one of the most important of which is as a basis for establishing educational goals. These women were in the process of considering the level of academic achievement/educational attainment they hoped for or wanted, along with the level of academic achievement/educational attainment they determined would be possible for them in the context of participation in their adult education and literacy programs. As the women encountered obstacles to their academic progress, they formulated identities as "serious students" and produced a sustained academic effort, which helped them develop the discipline necessary to focus on their studies and prioritize their commitments to

continuing their educations, even as they attempted to balance competing identities and responsibilities.

Although they found many of the processes of transition challenging, their commitment to move forward with their educational plans kept them focused. In the process of transitioning to college, they drew on their educational aspirations and expectations to balance the risks they were taking to finance their educations against the personal costs of relinquishing their dream of attaining a college degree. In short, the women who transitioned to college were determined to succeed. Equally important, their teachers and counselors in their adult education and literacy programs were determined to help them succeed.

Within adult education and literacy programs, the most important organizational resource was teachers and academic counselors who conveyed their confidence in educationally disadvantaged women's academic and intellectual abilities and offered them the support and encouragement they needed to build self-esteem and overcome their fear of failure. I argued in the introduction to this dissertation that although the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study were exceptional in terms of their academic persistence, they were in most ways like many other educationally disadvantaged women students I've taught in adult education and literacy programs and in college developmental writing courses over the years: They had a lot going for them—but they had a lot going against them as well.

One of the biggest things going against educationally disadvantaged women is having had their academic needs routinely ignored by schools that have failed them and/or their intellectual abilities discounted by a society that refuses to recognize their potential. The educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study struggled daily against the combined effects of gender, racial/ethnic, and social class subordination—and the pervasive social and economic injustices they perpetuate—as they attempted to achieve

an adult high school diploma or GED with the hope of one day going on to college. As educator Olivia Castellano (1992) has written about her experiences teaching educationally disadvantaged students who had recently transitioned to college:

I continue to see myself as a warrior empowered by my rage. Racism and sexism leave two clear-cut scars on my students; internalized self-hatred and fear of their own creative passion, in my view the two most serious obstacles in the classroom. Confronting this two-headed monster has made me razor-sharp. Given their tragic personal stories, the hope in my students' eyes reconfirms daily the incredible beauty, the tenacity of the human spirit. . . .

[Y]ou have to bring about changes in the way they view themselves, their abilities, their right to get educated and their relation to a world that has systematically oppressed them simply for being who they are. (P.381)

Castellano's teaching experiences and conclusions mirror my own. Teachers, counselors, and administrators who are most successful teaching educationally disadvantaged women are those who are keenly aware of the social conditions that shape these women's lives as well as their learning experiences and use this awareness to "bring about changes in the way they view themselves, their abilities [and] their right to get educated." Doing so requires caring enough about them to take their academic and intellectual needs and abilities seriously by maintaining the always uneasy balance between competence (i.e., academic expectations) and humanity (i.e., support and encouragement).

It is my hope that this dissertation will be useful to those of us who are dedicated to bringing about these changes.

## **CHAPTER 8: Major Findings and Conclusions**

In this final chapter, I will discuss the major findings and conclusions of this dissertation research project, which has investigated the educational aspirations and expectations of women who are educationally disadvantaged in the context of their non-traditional educational trajectories. I will also outline future directions for research and offer policy recommendations. In the final section, I offer a feminist critique of the usefulness of status-attainment theory and human capital theory for explaining the educational aspirations and expectations of women who are educationally disadvantaged, doing so in the context of the major findings of the research project.

### DISCUSSION OF MAJOR FINDINGS

The research questions guiding this investigation were: 1) Why do educationally disadvantaged women value education—how are these values transmitted, and what are the social processes through which they are translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations? 2) What are the broader social processes and institutional arrangements that shape educationally disadvantaged women's educational aspirations and expectations? and 3) How are gender, age, race/ethnicity, and social class implicated in the development of educationally disadvantaged women's non-traditional educational trajectories?

#### Educational Aspirations and Expectations

The educational aspirations of the twenty women who participated in the study were quite high, all but one woman aspiring to post-secondary education at some level. When discussing their reasons for aspiring to post-secondary education, educational aspirations and expectations were often linked to occupational and/or professional goals. In general, the higher the prior educational attainment of the woman, the higher were her educational aspirations and the more specific were her occupational/professional goals. However, this

pattern did not hold with educational expectations: All of the women who participated in the study projected a *very high level of self-confidence* in their potential to fulfill their educational aspirations regardless of their level of prior educational attainment, level of educational aspiration, or the specificity with which they described their occupational or professional goals. Therefore, these women were determined to fulfill their educational aspirations and reach their occupational and/or professional goals, however configured; moreover, they were convinced that they had the capacity to do so. *Indeed, as is demonstrated throughout this study, one of the most distinctive characteristics of the women who participated in the study was their unrelenting determination to succeed.*

On average, the educational aspirations of the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women were higher than those of the Latinas or Irish American women. However, the Latinas and Irish American women were about a generation younger and had achieved lower levels of overall prior educational attainment than the Haitian, Cape Verdean, or African American women, both of which may have contributed to their lower levels of educational aspiration. African American women had the highest educational aspirations, relative to their prior educational attainment, than did any other racial/ethnic group. Although the older women in the study acknowledged health concerns as potential barriers, age *per se* was not an issue for them: Socio-cultural beliefs or assumptions about the age-appropriateness of post-secondary education influenced neither their educational aspirations nor their educational expectations. The oldest women in the study were among those who articulated the highest educational aspirations even though most had dropped out of high school.

Although the women linked their educational aspirations to occupational and/or professional goals, the reasons given by most of the women for *both* their educational aspirations and their occupational/professional goals were directly related to the value they placed on achieving the social status/identity that accrues to those who have attained a

college education and work in an occupation/profession that requires one. Social status considerations were also closely related to the degree of personal satisfaction women associated with the educational achievement and to what they believed the educational credential would accomplish for them in terms of the perceptions of others, particularly those in authority.

In addition to social status/identity considerations, many women also integrated their educational aspirations and occupational/professional goals with an expression of their religious and/or political values and beliefs. They clearly understood these goals as a means to a greater end: that of fulfilling their commitment to helping others, being of service to their communities, and/or advancing the cause of social justice. Although considerations of social status/identity and fulfillment of religious and/or political values and beliefs did at times intersect with economic concerns, for the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study, economic concerns were a secondary consideration. These women assumed that once employed in an occupation or profession that required a college degree, they would earn an adequate living income as a condition of having met this requirement.

#### The Transmission of Educational Values

The two primary sources of the transmission of educational values were family socialization processes and work experiences.

Within families, the social processes that were most important for transmitting educational values were: 1) communication of the message that school attendance was required and, if necessary, would be enforced and 2) that active encouragement to attend, do well, and finish school be received. The most influential family members for transmitting educational values were mothers and grandmothers. Fathers and grandfathers, even when present in households, were relatively insignificant in both of these social processes. Mothers and grandmothers encouraged daughters and granddaughters to value education by explaining why education was important to them; moreover, the explanatory frameworks

developed by these mothers and grandmothers conveyed this importance through rationales that differed by race/ethnicity. In doing so, mothers and grandmothers framed their explanations of the importance of education within broader socio-historical and socio-economic contexts.

For the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women, the "educational opportunity/family responsibility" narrative linked the importance of education to broader histories of gender and racial/ethnic subordination and discrimination. These women were encouraged to take advantage of educational opportunities that their mothers and grandmothers had not had, either because they were women (i.e., the Haitian and Cape Verdean women) or because they were black women (i.e., the African American women). In addition, these women were also expected to use their educational attainment to help others in their families and communities who had been less fortunate. By framing their encouragement in this way, mothers and grandmothers emphasized that education was as much, if not more, about family and community responsibility as it was about individual opportunity.

The Latinas and Irish American women in the study, on the other hand, were encouraged to attend and finish school primarily through a narrative that emphasized the link between higher levels of educational attainment and greater access to work opportunities, the "educational attainment/work opportunity" narrative. These mothers emphasized the importance of education to their daughters primarily as women workers. In doing so, the Latina and Irish American mothers' narratives linked the importance of education to a broader socio-economic history of social class subordination. Although both the Latinas and Irish American women had their own distinct racial/ethnic histories, these histories did not inform the narratives through which their mothers conveyed the importance of education to them. Instead, the Latina and Irish American mothers focused on making daughters aware of the hardships they would face in attempting to earn an

adequate family income with extremely low levels of educational attainment. By framing their encouragement in this way, mothers emphasized that education was primarily about individual access to work opportunities.

The second primary source of the transmission of educational values was work experiences. The women who participated in the study learned from their work experiences, most of which were negative, that minimum educational requirements often had to be met to qualify for employment or promotion and that even most entry-level jobs required a U.S. high school diploma or GED. The women also learned that educational requirements were increasing over time and that skills acquisition, although necessary, was not a sufficient preparation for employment or promotion—at least the minimum level of educational attainment required for the job, often expressed as a distinct educational credential, was necessary as well. In addition, the women learned that not meeting minimum educational requirements often channeled them away from legitimate employers and left them open for various forms of labor exploitation.

Based on their working experiences, several women questioned the notion that a high school diploma or GED was actually a necessary prerequisite for being able to perform the duties required of many jobs. Most of the women were aware that they had routinely used skills to perform the duties of jobs (usually in the low-end service sector), but were not paid the customary wage because they had not attained a U.S. high school diploma or GED. As I argued in Chapter 5, these women were often encountering particular institutional arrangements in the organization of work that were not directly related to skills deficits on their part. Minimum educational requirements were being used as an artificial criteria for either keeping them out of jobs altogether, or for paying them less than their skills warranted when they were hired. The economic restructuring of the new economy has had a significant impact on both their work experiences and work opportunities, as well as their educational aspirations and expectations. What educationally disadvantaged women have

learned from working in this new economy is that they need to develop their skills and attain as much education as possible in an effort to avoid continued subordination and exploitation by employers.

### The Translation of Educational Values

Educational values that were transmitted through family socialization processes and work experiences were translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations through three distinct, though often overlapping, social processes: acquiring self-confidence, achieving and maintaining independence, and accepting family responsibility. Although these social processes were explained primarily in the context of schooling in adult education and literacy programs, they developed over each woman's unique non-traditional educational trajectory.

First, as these women participated in their adult education and literacy programs, they acquired self-confidence in their skills and abilities over time. Although all of the women projected a very high level of self-confidence in their potential to fulfill their educational aspirations at the level at which they articulated them—reflected in their high expectations of their potential for reaching their educational and occupational goals—their acquisition of self-confidence was expressed more generally as a firm belief in their competence, not only academically, but socially and occupationally/professionally as well. Second, these women developed both a desire and a commitment to achieve and maintain independence in various forms: independence in relationships with male partners, husbands, or adult children; independence in relationship to the expectations of parents and/or others; and independence in terms of developing explanations for their own experiences and the life circumstances they had faced. Thus, achieving and maintaining independence in these various forms was generally grounded in the women's insistence on thinking independently, in formulating their own rationales, and in trusting in their own judgment. Finally, women recognized educational attainment as a necessity for being able

to provide materially for themselves and their families. They accepted family responsibility by transmitting educational values to their children and by conveying the message to them that education provided a means for achieving greater independence.

As I argued in Chapter 6, these social processes often overlapped. As women became more self-confident in their skills and abilities over time, they wanted to achieve and maintain a greater degree of independence in their relationships, particularly with male partners or husbands; they wanted to be able to think independently in their own interest and to act on these assessments, including establishing their own educational goals and working towards achieving them; and they transmitted these values to their children. The women who participated in the study understood that there is a direct link between educational attainment and greater work opportunities and that both would afford them more bargaining power with those in positions of authority. In other words, the women were attempting to alter power relations in their favor by expanding the educational and occupational choices that were available to themselves and their children. In doing so, these women were resisting gender, age, racial/ethnic, and/or social class subordination.

#### Early Schooling: The Integration of Schooling With Family

Early schooling provided an important social context for the transmission of educational values, one closely aligned with family. Women whose early schooling was well integrated with family described more positive early schooling experiences than did those women whose early schooling was poorly integrated with family, and women who had been both required and encouraged to attend school described much more positive early schooling experiences than women who were not. In addition, women who recalled having had teachers who supported, encouraged, and/or inspired them in some way described much more positive early schooling experiences. In general, the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women described more positive early schooling experiences than did the Latinas or Irish American women. Women who were raised in unstable families (e.g. where

abuse, neglect, crises, and/or trauma were prevalent) described the most negative early schooling experiences.

Two-thirds of the women who participated in the study had dropped out of high school, and the Latinas had dropped out the earliest, most in the 9th grade. Although the women who had dropped out of high school reported various reasons for having done so, almost half dropped out because of family reasons, including financial difficulties and leaving home; three women had dropped out because of pregnancy. However, reasons often overlapped resulting in a chain of circumstances or events that led to dropping out. Most of the women expressed regret at having dropped out of school because they said they were doing very well in school academically at the time. Only two women, both Latinas, indicated that they had dropped out of school because of overwhelming academic difficulties.

As I argued in Chapter 4, although as a set of institutional arrangements, early schooling provided an important social context for the transmission of educational values, early schooling was not a primary source of the transmission of these values. Regardless of whether their early schooling was well integrated with family or poorly integrated with family, whether they described positive or negative early schooling experiences, or whether they had dropped out of high school or not, all of the women cultivated high enough educational aspirations to enroll in adult education and literacy programs, and all but one aspired to post-secondary education; eight women transitioned to college, and four of these had been high school drop outs, two of whom described very negative early schooling experiences that were also very poorly integrated with family. In addition to their cultivation of educational aspirations, all of the women cultivated high enough educational *expectations* to express confidence in their potential for reaching their academic and occupational or professional goals.

The positive early schooling experiences of the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women, all of whom were required and encouraged to attend school, were

instrumental in *reinforcing* the explanatory frameworks their mothers and grandmothers had used to convey the importance of education to them through family socialization processes. Teachers who were perceived as competent and supportive, along with cooperative schooling practices that were well integrated with family, facilitated the transmission of educational values. On the other hand, for those Latinas and Irish American women who were required and encouraged to attend school, negative early schooling experiences were instrumental in *negating* the explanatory frameworks their mothers had used to convey the importance of education to them.

For example, all of the Latinas dropped out of high school even though most of their mothers stressed the importance of the link between educational attainment and greater work opportunities. Learning disabilities that were undiagnosed, teachers who were not memorable, chronic academic difficulties that were not sufficiently addressed, and contradictory messages about the priority of marriage and domestic responsibilities over education impeded the transmission of educational values through family socialization processes. The Latinas who believed that unreasonable expectations had been placed upon them for fulfilling family responsibilities for childcare and housework described how they had resisted these expectations and often expressed resentment toward parents.

For these Latinas, work experiences became a primary source of the transmission of educational values, as they were for those women in the study who were neither required nor encouraged to attend school. And, as I argue above, what the women learned from their work experiences is that they needed to attain as much education as possible to avoid further exploitation by employers. In other words, although negative schooling experiences often negated what mothers had conveyed to their daughters about the importance of education, often exacerbating the chain of circumstances and events that led to their decision to drop out of high school, their working experiences reinforced these messages, demonstrating to them that their mothers had been right after all.

### Returning to School: Adult Education and Literacy Programs

All of the women reported very positive schooling experiences in their current adult education and literacy programs. Those women who described positive early schooling experiences, but had dropped out of high school, indicated that they had always intended to return to school to attain a high school diploma or GED. Alternatively, most of the women who described negative early schooling experiences—all of whom had dropped out of high school—indicated that they had decided to return to school only after having children of their own and realizing that they needed to attain an adult high school diploma or GED to earn a living for themselves and their families.

Women often cycled through several adult education and literacy programs before they found the "right program" at the "right time" for them. For these women, the "right program" was one that would provide them support and encouragement as well as meet their academic needs. The primary barriers the women faced, both to returning to school and to successfully completing their adult education and literacy programs, were: 1) child care responsibilities, 2) fear of failure, 3) irregular working hours, 4) uncooperative employers, and 5) academic difficulties. For most of the women, these barriers often overlapped. Women attempted to enter programs during times when they were able to circumvent these barriers: when they could arrange for adequate child care, when they were out of work, or when the parameters of their employment would accommodate returning to school.

As I argued in Chapter 6, for those women who had graduated from high school, all of whom described positive early schooling experiences, positive experiences in adult education and literacy programs provided a relatively seamless transition to returning to school, even for those women who had been out of school for decades. For those women who had dropped out of high school and described negative early schooling experiences, positive experiences in adult education and literacy programs offered an educational

alternative. Whereas early schooling provided an important social context for the transmission of educational values, reinforcing or negating the explanatory frameworks mothers and grandmothers used to convey the importance of education, later schooling in adult education and literacy programs provided an important social context for the translation of educational values into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. For the women who participated in this study, adult education and literacy programs were a resource for developing social and academic skills, for building self-esteem and acquiring self-confidence, for attaining secondary-level educational credentials, for cultivating educational aspirations and expectations for college, and for establishing occupational and/or professional goals.

#### Persistence and Transition

Women who had transitioned to college faced many of the same obstacles that the other women had faced—serious financial difficulties, the necessity to work while attending school, and/or overwhelming family obligations. However, the women who had transitioned to college did not focus on these obstacles. Instead, women who had transitioned to college focused on developing strategies for overcoming obstacles that were directly related to their academic performance and achievement. Two social processes facilitated their persistence in adult education and literacy programs and their transition to college in the context of the cultivation of their educational aspirations and expectations. First, these women adopted an identity as "serious students." They developed the ability to maintain a focus on their academic work because as serious students, their primary orientation was toward reaching their educational goals. Second, in an effort to overcome academic challenges, these women learned to produce a sustained academic effort, which helped them acquire self-confidence in their academic abilities. These women learned that they could achieve academically if they tried hard enough for long enough. Teachers and academic counselors facilitated the development of persistence by conveying clearly articulated academic

expectations and by offering support and encouragement, by introducing collaborative learning approaches, and by providing an opportunity for the women to learn how educational institutional environments operate through bureaucratic processes.

Drawing on the skills they had developed through their persistence in their adult education and literacy programs, the women who transitioned to college developed strategies for negotiating the challenges of transition. Although many of the women who transitioned to college were relatively academically underprepared, their critical and analytical skills were well developed, and they were open to new learning experiences and new learning environments. Although the bureaucratic processes of transition required them to navigate new, complex, and often confusing institutional environments, these women were willing to take the risks necessary to move forward even in the face of uncertain academic and financial futures because they were committed to reaching their educational and occupational/professional goals. In short, the women who transitioned to college were determined to succeed.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

The findings of this study indicated that the women who participated in the study valued post-secondary education primarily as a means for achieving social status/identity and for fulfilling their commitments to religious and/or political values and beliefs. In addition, older women tended to focus on the personal satisfaction they expected to achieve through educational attainment; whereas, younger women tended to focus on the personal independence they expected to achieve. I have argued in this dissertation that the reason the women placed so little emphasis on economic returns is because they assumed that once they attained a college degree and secured employment in an occupation or profession that required one, they would earn an adequate living income as a condition of their employment; therefore, they focused on non-economic returns.

I based this conclusion on the available data: The women clearly understood that there is a direct link between educational attainment and greater work opportunities, and they indicated they had learned from their work experiences that they needed to meet educational requirements to market skills. However, future research that examines the reasons why educationally disadvantaged women aspire to post-secondary education should examine both their educational and occupational/professional aspirations more closely to discern how they arrive at valuations of both economic and non-economic returns and how these valuations shape their labor market orientations. For example, why are social status/identity considerations so important to educationally disadvantaged women? Equally important, why aren't economic considerations more important than they appear to be? And finally, what is the relationship between the two?

In this study I found that family socialization processes were a primary transmitter of educational values and that the most influential family members for transmitting these educational values were mothers and grandmothers. In addition, I found that the younger women who participated in the study were accepting responsibility for transmitting educational values to their own children. I also found racial/ethnic differences in the explanatory frameworks that mothers and grandmothers used to convey the importance of education to their daughters and granddaughters. But there may also be important differences in these frameworks by age and/or generation.

For example, the 20 year old Latina, the youngest woman in the study, emphasized achieving and maintaining independence when she explained the educational values she was transmitting to her 4 year old daughter: "I don't want to have to depend on anyone. I want to do things for myself. . . . And I don't want my daughter to think it's okay *to have to depend on men.*" This woman was two generations younger than the oldest women who participated in the study, which may account for the emphasis she placed on transmitting the value of "independence through education" to her own daughter. Future research should

examine these intergenerational processes of the transmission of educational values by race/ethnicity as well as by age/generation. There may also be important differences in the ways that educational values are transmitted by social class.

My findings indicated that fathers and grandfathers were relatively insignificant in the social processes of transmitting educational values through family socialization processes (See Chapter 3). I also found that most of the women who participated in the study placed a very high value on achieving and maintaining independence in relationship to male partners or husbands, which was reflected in the marital status of the sample (see Chapter 6). In addition, seven women who participated in the study, about one-third of the sample, reported male violence and abuse in their educational life histories. Finally, I argued in Chapter 3 that what all four of the women in the study who were neither required nor encouraged to attend school had in common was having spent formative years living in male-dominated households where they experienced abuse and/or neglect.

As noted in the introduction, feminist researchers in the field of adult education and literacy have identified male violence against women as a major barrier to women's participation in education. Future research should focus on explaining why it is that relationships with men, including fathers and grandfathers, male partners and husbands, so negatively affect educationally disadvantaged women's educational achievement and attainment. In other words, precisely how are these unequal power relations organized on a micro-sociological level, and how are they reinforced on a macro-sociological level?

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Increase Funding for More Adult Education and Literacy Programs

*The number of adult education and literacy programs should be increased and teachers and counselors should be paid more.*

Currently, there are not enough adult education and literacy programs to meet demand, and many programs maintain "waitlists." Funding to increase the number of programs available would help to meet the needs of those who are not being served. In addition, pay scales for teachers and academic counselors should be increased. Many of the most highly qualified and effective teachers and academic counselors leave the field of adult education and literacy for better pay, benefits, and working conditions.

### The Provision of Childcare

*Reliable, high-quality, early childcare and education programs should be publically provided for the pre-school aged children of women who want to enroll in adult education and literacy programs to earn a high school diploma or GED.*

The greatest barrier to returning to school for the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study was the lack of reliable, affordable, high-quality childcare for their pre-school aged children. Most of the women found it necessary to wait until their youngest child was in elementary school for the full day before they could attempt to enroll in an adult education and literacy program. Most of those women who did attempt enrollment before this time, found it necessary to drop out because of conflicts with childcare arrangements. For many of the women, this meant waiting until they were nearing the age of thirty and had been out of school for over ten years before they could enroll in an adult education and literacy program with much chance of remaining long enough to earn a high school diploma or GED. All of the seven women who were students in Northside Family Learning Program (NFLP) emphasized that the early childcare and education programs that

were available to their children while they themselves were attending school made it possible for them to remain enrolled in their programs.

#### Instruction in Federal and State Labor Laws and Labor Rights

*Adult education and literacy programs should incorporate instruction in federal and state labor laws and labor rights into their workplace curriculums.*

The exploitation of labor by employers was a very serious problem faced by many of the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study. Although some of the women had good jobs, most did not. In addition, many of the women who wanted to work remained unemployed because of past experiences with abusive employers and very poor working conditions, many of which were violations of state and federal labor laws. Most adult education and literacy programs already offer workplace classes that help acclimate students to workplace culture and build soft skills. Incorporating instruction in federal and state labor laws (e.g., The Fair Labor Standards Act) into these curriculums would, at a minimum, empower these women by informing them of their rights.

#### Funding for Math Tutors

*State education budgets should increase funding for adult education and literacy programs line-itemed for hiring math tutors.*

A number of the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study indicated that they had struggled with academic difficulties in math that had impeded their progress in their adult education and literacy programs. Many of these women had faced academic challenges with math since their early elementary school years. For many women, just knowing that math tutoring would be available to them would ease issues with math anxiety. Although adult education and literacy programs are generally underfunded, modest increases in state funding that would be dedicated to hiring part-time math tutors would help these struggling students maintain academic progress, increasing their chances of completing their programs and earning a high school diploma or GED.

## A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF STATUS-ATTAINMENT THEORY AND HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY

In this section, I offer a feminist critique of the usefulness of both status-attainment theory and human capital theory for explaining the educational aspirations and expectations of women who are educationally disadvantaged, doing so in the context of the major findings of this dissertation research project. As noted in the introduction, status-attainment theory and human capital theory were important to this research because I drew from the propositions of each of these theories to establish an initial conceptual foundation for the study. The proposition that educational values are transmitted through family socialization processes and that these educational values, once transmitted, become a basis for the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations comes directly from status-attainment theory. The proposition that educational aspirations are the outcome of economic cost-benefit calculations used to assess the exchange value of educational skills and credentials in the labor market comes directly from human capital theory. In the following sections, I outline some of the more serious limitations of each of these theories for explaining the educational aspirations and expectations of educationally disadvantaged women who follow non-traditional educational trajectories.

### Status-Attainment Theory

As argued in Chapter 3, and demonstrated throughout this dissertation, educational outcomes are the product of integrated social processes that are complex, dynamic, and longitudinal. When gender, age, race/ethnicity and/or social class are taken into consideration, the transmission of educational values is related to the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations (as well as to social mobility patterns) in multi-dimensional ways that cannot be adequately explained by the status-attainment model. Because this model does not address systems of social stratification and the ways they have evolved over time, it has promoted an ahistorical understanding of the transmission of

educational values and the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectation that has limited usefulness for explaining why women, particularly those who are educationally disadvantaged, value education or how educational values are transmitted to them.

Because the status-attainment model was originally based on the mobility patterns of white, rural, middle-class males, the understanding of educational aspirations and expectations it advanced prioritized the influence of significant others' (particularly parents') expectations as they were conveyed to adolescent sons. The origin of mobility in the model was a measure of father's occupational prestige and the destination was a measure of son's occupational prestige. Educational aspirations and expectations fell among a range of intervening variables that were measured and interpreted as individual characteristics and then used as an explanation for the social processes through which educational values were inter-generationally transmitted. The purpose of the model was to show that social mobility in the United States was ultimately achieved through ability and effort (i.e., educational achievement and attainment) and not wholly ascribed through family lineage (i.e., father's socio-economic status).

Although the model was originally developed as a universal explanation for the social mobility patterns of everyone (i.e., the entire society), it ignored gender and race/ethnicity, which resulted in a model with limited explanatory power when applied to the mobility patterns of women and racial/ethnic minorities. In other words, the model was over-generalized. Later applications of the model did, however, yield interesting findings about how socio-economic status and measured academic ability affected educational aspirations and expectations by gender.

For example, in a review of findings from their own applications of the model, Sewell and Hauser (1993) discuss their finding that girls with the highest measured ability from the highest socio-economic quarter were *three times more likely* to have college plans than were girls who had equally high measured ability but were from the lowest socio-economic

quarter. High ability, higher status boys were *twice as likely* to have college plans as were high ability, lower status boys. They concluded:

We believe the failure of many able, lower status children to have high aspirations is as likely to result from the student's perception of lack of encouragement by parents and teachers as it is to the lack of financial resources. (P. 10)

We were particularly interested in the effects of parents on the development and maintenance of their children's aspirations. Parents serve as models to be emulated, and they are constantly revealing their overt and covert evaluations and expectations through interactions with their child. We believe it is the child's perception of the parents' intent to encourage or discourage his/her educational aspirations that is crucial to the development and maintenance of those aspirations. (P. 11)

Sewell and Hauser go on to note that "the linkage between encouragement by parents and the child's perception of it is worthy of study in its own right, but it has not been an issue in our research" (p. 12). Hence, their discussion of these findings articulates the theory of the transmission of educational values underlying the status-attainment model.

Of course, the *perception* of "lack of encouragement" from parents and teachers could itself be a result of the actual effects of parents' lack of financial resources. The point is that the explanatory value of this model depends on the theory of educational aspirations and expectations that informs it, and this theory has never been comprehensive enough to offer an adequate explanation of how educational values are transmitted to women who are educationally disadvantaged, or of how these women then translate educational values into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. Nor has enough attention been given to the numerous ways that gender expectations create informal barriers to women's academic achievement, which negatively effects both their educational expectations and their educational aspirations. Although the status-attainment model has been very useful for explaining the transmission of educational values and the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations among white, middle-class males, when parents' intent and children's perceptions of that intent vary by both gender and race/ethnicity, then "the

effects of parents on the development and maintenance of their children's aspirations" are also very likely to vary by gender and race/ethnicity, as was the case in this study.

My findings show, for example, that for the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study, it was not *parents*, but mothers and grandmothers who were influential in the family socialization processes that transmitted educational values to daughters and granddaughters. For the most part, fathers and grandfathers, even when present in the household, were insignificant in these processes, or, in a number of cases when fathers (or stepfathers) were present, they actually hindered the transmission of educational values. Moreover, although my sample was small, I found these effects among women representing five different racial/ethnic groups, two of which were immigrant. The status-attainment theory of educational aspirations and expectations assumes that parents will have the same or similar effects regardless of generation or gender.

In addition, the most important family socialization processes for the transmission of educational values—the explanatory frameworks that mothers and grandmothers used to convey the importance of education—differed by race/ethnicity. Furthermore, these explanatory frameworks were in effect the socio-historical products of systems of gender, racial/ethnic, and/or social class stratification. Mothers and grandmothers not only encouraged their daughters and granddaughters to value education, they encouraged them by explaining why education was important to them *as women, as black women, and/or as women workers*.

As I have argued, explanatory frameworks grounded in family narratives of "educational opportunity/family responsibility" encouraged the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations that evolved into forms and strategies of resistance. The Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American women wanted to take advantage of educational opportunities to achieve upward social mobility in terms of occupation and/or profession, but for most, their real passion was to use their educational attainment to help

others, particularly in their own families and communities because they valued fulfilling the (very gendered) expectations that their mothers and grandmothers had conveyed to them. The status-attainment theory of educational aspirations and expectations is unable to recognize that as some dimensions of educational aspirations and expectations are cultivated, they evolve into forms and strategies of resistance because it ignores the socio-historical contexts that have inspired this resistance.

Equally important, for women who follow non-traditional educational trajectories, educational aspirations do not, for the most part, become the product of family expectations in the seamless and straight-forward manner suggested by status-attainment theory. Because the status-attainment theory of educational aspirations and expectations does not adequately consider the implications of gender, age, or race/ethnicity, it fails to address the ways in which parental expectations are also gendered expectations, or the ways in which gendered expectations are also shaped by race/ethnicity over the life course.

As one example, the gendered expectation that the Haitian, Cape Verdean, and African American mothers and grandmothers conveyed to daughters and granddaughters through their explanatory frameworks (i.e., they were expected to use educational opportunity as a means for taking responsibility for their families and communities). As another example, the gendered expectation that daughters and granddaughters who did not attend school should be required to take responsibility for housework—a strategy for enforcing attendance. And as a final example, the tensions created when Latina mothers both required school attendance and, at the same time, expected their daughters to accept, what was in some cases, enormous responsibilities for housework and the care of younger siblings. These parental expectations are also being shaped by social class in cultural ways that have important structural consequences, neither of which, I argue, can be explained through measures of socio-economic status.

Moreover, the social processes through which educational values were translated into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations among the women who participated in this study—acquiring self-confidence in one's skills and abilities; achieving and maintaining independence, personally and intellectually; and accepting responsibility for one's self and family—were all integrated social processes that had evolved over the life course. The status-attainment theory of educational aspirations and expectations, on the other hand, focuses on adolescence, understanding this brief period in the human life span as that most influential for the transmission of educational values and the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations. However, as demonstrated by this research, for women who follow non-traditional educational trajectories, the translation of educational values into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations is not age-bound and can occur at any stage of, or throughout, the life course.

#### Human Capital Theory

As argued in Chapter 5, and demonstrated throughout this dissertation, the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study understood that there is a direct link between educational attainment and greater work opportunities; however, this understanding was but one dimension of a broader multidimensional social process. Although these women employed economic cost-benefit calculations as they were making rational choices about education, they did so within a particular socio-historical context; therefore, the nature of these calculations, and the standards of judgment these women were using to make them were often configured very differently than would be predicted by a human capital theory interpretation. Because human capital theory ignores how the socio-cultural and political organization of society shapes the anticipated costs and benefits of both education and work for women, it promotes a very economically over-determined understanding of the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations that has limited

usefulness for explaining why educationally disadvantaged women value education or how educational values are transmitted to them.

Human capital theory is grounded in the primary assumptions of neoclassical economics: 1) that the economy is separate from culture and is governed by its own internal dynamics (i.e., has a life of its own) and 2) that individuals can be expected to act rationally in ways that will maximize their own economic self-interest (i.e., will ground their choices in economic cost-benefit calculations). The result is a society that evolves into a self-regulating market where individuals compete to maximize their returns through economic transactions (e.g., buying and selling products, labor, capital, etc.). According to this view, because technologically advanced societies have *evolved the need* for more highly-skilled workers, individuals will choose to invest in education (i.e., will aspire to higher levels of educational attainment) in an effort to continue to secure and maintain employment. Investments in education are considered to be a form of capital accumulation because more highly-skilled workers can trade their skills throughout the market; whereas, lower skilled workers are confined to particular organizations/industries. In other words, within a human capital theory framework all social action is considered to be economically driven; although relations of power and control are recognized, these relations are considered phenomena of the cultural realm of society, and, as such, can ultimately be reduced to economic transactions.

However, the reasons given by the women who participated in this study for both their educational aspirations and their occupational and/or professional goals did not center on economic returns. What these women emphasized was the social status they believed would accrue to a post-secondary certificate or degree, and what they anticipated this social status would do for them in terms of the impression it would make on others, particularly those in authority. They also emphasized the degree of self-satisfaction and sense of accomplishment they expected to realize from the educational achievement itself. In

addition to social status considerations, and sense of accomplishment, these women emphasized the ways in which they intended to use their educational attainment to fulfill commitments to religious and/or political values and beliefs.

Hence, educationally disadvantaged women were making rational choices about education that had important economic dimensions; however, the standards of judgment they were using to make them (i.e., their cost-benefit calculations) were grounded in their socio-cultural values and beliefs. Although economic returns were a consideration, these women's educational choices were clearly not being driven by purely economic interests. Moreover, these women's desire to achieve social status/identity through educational attainment had as much to do with their perception of how this social status would increase their bargaining power with those in authority as it did with enhancing their personal self-satisfaction. In other words, much of the sense of accomplishment they anticipated was grounded in their perception that achieving a college education would, in fact, increase their personal and social power—i.e., being given "meaningful choices" among a range of viable options, thereby, increasing their personal autonomy, and at the same time, bringing social status to their families and communities.

In addition, although these women learned from their work experiences that a U.S. high school diploma or GED was becoming an increasingly necessary requirement for employment—and might also afford them at least some degree of protection against the exploitation of their labor by employers—cultivating educational aspirations and expectations based on these educational values often introduced internal contradictions for the women who participated in the study. And this was true across differences of age, race/ethnicity, social class, and/or immigrant status.

For example, internal contradictions were clearly demonstrated in social processes of achieving and maintaining personal and intellectual independence. Women who translated educational values into the cultivation of educational aspirations and expectations often

resisted subordination in relationships with male partners or husbands, and, in doing so, challenged dominant socio-cultural beliefs about women's obligation to subordinate themselves to men, which can have negative social and economic consequences for women within particular social classes and cultural communities. These women also faced internal contradictions when they cultivated levels of independent thinking that challenged understandings held by the dominant society; in other words, when they challenged the status quo. For example, the older women in the study faced internal contradictions when they challenged socio-cultural beliefs about the age appropriateness of education, cultivated educational aspirations for college, and went on to become non-traditional college students.

As this dissertation research has demonstrated, the standards of judgment women use to make choices about education often require them to make compromises between meeting their own needs, on the one hand, and meeting the needs of others in their families and communities, on the other—*even when these needs are interrelated*. For example, educationally disadvantaged women need to participate in adult education and literacy programs to meet their own academic and intellectual needs, *and* to attain a high school diploma or GED so that they can secure employment through which to more adequately support themselves and their children. At the same time, these women are expected by their families and communities to fulfill the very gendered expectation that they always will put the immediate needs of their children ahead of their own, which often makes it impossible for them to participate in education. The women's accounts of their educational life histories indicated that they were making rational choices about education throughout their entire non-traditional educational trajectories; however, these rational choices were informed by the economic realities, *and social and cultural complexities*, of their own lives.

In addition, as argued in Chapter 4, although the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study learned from their work experiences that the

minimum educational requirement of a U.S. high school diploma or GED had to be met to qualify for most jobs, they also learned that there were discrepancies between the skills actually required to perform many of these jobs and minimum educational requirements. In other words, they learned that minimum educational requirements were often being used as an artificial criteria for either keeping them out of jobs or for paying them less than their skills warranted when hired. For example, the analysis of the Latina who performed the duties of an assistant manager, but was employed as a cashier: *One does not need a high school diploma to learn to bag groceries.* These women were encountering institutional arrangements in the organization of work that had little to do with any actual skill deficits on their part. However, human capital theory is grounded in the proposition that educational requirements increase in proportion to the need for more highly skilled labor.

Although this might be true for higher-end segments of the labor market, the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study were facing forms of credential inflation that led to the exploitation of their labor—a phenomenon that human capital theory is not equipped to adequately explain. Although educationally disadvantaged women do lack the minimum educational credentials required by many employers, what they also lack is any degree of power and authority over their work. As Randal Collins (1979) argued in his early critique of this evolving "credential society":

The "system" does not "need" or "demand" a certain kind of performance; it "needs" what it gets, because "it" is nothing more than a slipshod way of talking about the way things happen to be at the time. How hard people work, and with what dexterity and cleverness, depends on how much other people can require them to do and on how much they can dominate other people.

What the advance of technology does do, rather, is increase the total wealth produced and lead to intense struggles over the shaping of property in occupational positions, not because of the necessities of production but because of the struggle over the distribution of the increased wealth. (P. 54)

Even though Collins formulated this argument over three decades ago when computer technology was still in its infancy, his insight that what ultimately determines how a society

responds to technological innovation is not a result of how it "needs" to respond, but a result of the exercise of power and control, is as relevant today as it was thirty years ago. If the economy is, in fact, self-regulating, and has evolved the *need* for a more highly trained work force, then why has this economy proved so incapable of regulating itself to meet this need? As Heidi Hartmann (1996) has argued:

[E]ndorsement of the marketplace as the sorting and rewarding mechanism for us all must give those of us who fare less well in the market substantial reason for concern. . . . I hope that at least some progressive economists (and others) will train their sights on market failure and the ways in which we must regulate markets to help them come closer to achieving their theoretical efficiencies. If, as has been said, markets come out of the barrel of a gun, then it would be difficult to isolate markets and market outcomes from the underlying distribution of power. (P.2)

Although the economy may have a life of its own, that life is a made thing, and it has been made in the interests of those who have had the power to make it what it is, and to then define what that is for the rest of us. As the 46 year old Haitian woman who participated in this study so aptly put it: "When you are educated you can say what you want and you can say *what you need*. But if you are not educated, you have to swallow whatever they give you because you have no choice." For the educationally disadvantaged women who participated in this study, educational attainment was as much about resisting the continued exploitation of their labor by employers as it was about marketing their educational credentials to them.

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## APPENDIX A

Imagine yourself going back in time to discover where this long journey in your education began . . .

What is your first memory of school . . . was it happy or sad? Explain . . .

What school or schools did you attend? Where were they located? When you think about being there, what thoughts or feelings do you have? Does one grade level or one teacher or one event stand out? . . .

Who, if anyone, spoke about school or education to you at home? What messages were you given about school? What was said, or what did you see (books around the house, family outings, . . . ) . . .

Were you led to believe education was important, valuable, a waste of time, unimportant?

Do you remember liking school or disliking school? Why? . . .

Thinking back to elementary or high school, how did you feel about yourself as a student/learner? . . . Did most things come easily, or more difficult to you? . . . What was easy and what was hard? . . .

What were the reasons you dropped out of school? . . .

When did you first consider returning to school? Why did you come to [this adult education program]? . . .

Did you attend any other adult education programs before [this program]? . . .

What are some of the obstacles you have faced since you have returned to school? . . .

Describe your experience here [in the adult education program] . . .

What are the expectations put on you by teachers and other adult learners? . . . What do you expect from [the adult education program]? . . .

How would you describe yourself as a learner? How do you learn best? What place does learning have in your life? . . .

Where do you get the support you need to keep moving ahead with your education? . . .

What is the biggest challenge for you now as an adult learner? . . .

Where are you headed? What are your goals for the next several years? . . .

What level of education do you hope to achieve? . . .

What level of education do you expect to be able to achieve? . . .

What are your dreams for your children and their education? . . .

## APPENDIX B

**Educational Life History Questionnaire**

Please fill in the following information to complete your educational life history:

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_ Religion \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status: Single \_\_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_\_ Separated \_\_\_\_\_

If married, is your spouse employed: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Children: \_\_\_\_\_ Ages of Children:

\_\_\_\_\_

Are you now employed: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If employed, what is your occupation: \_\_\_\_\_ Previous occupation

\_\_\_\_\_

Annual Household Income:

Any additional comments can be written in the space below:

\$5,000 -- \$14,999 \_\_\_\_\_

\$15,000 -- \$25,999 \_\_\_\_\_

\$26,000 -- \$35,999 \_\_\_\_\_

\$36,000 -- \$45,999 \_\_\_\_\_

\$46,000 -- \$60,999 \_\_\_\_\_

\$61,000 -- \$75,999 \_\_\_\_\_

\$76,000 and above \_\_\_\_\_

Highest grade completed (1 – 12) before entering any adult education and literacy program:

Schools attended, when, and where located:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_